

THE WIT, WARMTH AND WISDOM OF GEOFFREY BOLTON

On 2 August 2017, **Bill Bunbury OAM**, Presenter of [Hindsight](#), ABC Radio Social History Unit, spoke to the Kimberley Society about oral history interviews he had recorded with the late [Professor Geoffrey Bolton](#). The interviews, which commenced in the late 1970s, were done at intervals over four decades. A précis of the talk, during which Bill played extracts from Hindsight, follows. An [MP3](#) of the talk, which was first presented to the Friends of Battye Library in 2016, can be accessed via that group's website.

Recognised as Western Australia's most prominent historian, Geoffrey died at the age of eighty-three in September 2015. He and Bill had spoken two days earlier, reminiscing about shared journeys and Geoffrey's considerable help to Bill over many years. When Geoffrey's wife Carol then asked Bill to speak about him at his Memorial Service at St George's Cathedral in Perth on 5 October, Bill felt extremely honoured.

In his opening remarks to "The Wit, Warmth and Wisdom", Bill mentioned that he should have added "Width" to the title of his presentation—such was Geoffrey Bolton's range. That range was evident from the start of the talk, with the first extract relating the role of the [Trans Australian Railway](#) in the story of [Federation](#). Bill had asked for a sound level before they got into the interview, and Geoffrey had promptly reeled off an announcement for the train's arrival at Parkeston and the stations for which to change there. That sound level was transformed into an introduction to the Hindsight program. Bill said, "I couldn't resist this sample of both his prodigious memory for detail and his ability to deliver it. The only thing missing was the stationmaster's whistle."

In discussing his friend's long and productive life, Bill said, "Travelling with Geoffrey Bolton was an adventure in itself. At almost any spot on the Australian land mass there was a story to share, illustrated with unforgettable anecdotes." Then, moving on to Geoffrey's book [A Fine Country To Starve In](#), he played an extract from an interview and commented that Geoffrey's words at the start of the book 'capture both his lifelong commitment to history and his empathy for so called "ordinary people" who bore the brunt of events like the [Great Depression](#)'.

In quoting Geoffrey's anecdotes about his early years, Bill said:

The boy's father kept his job throughout the 1930s, so he was sheltered from the worst effects of the Depression. But, however peripheral, the Depression was indubitably a presence in his early consciousness.

Much later, when the boy was a young adult, he left Western Australia for eleven or twelve years, returning to teach history at the University of Western Australia in 1966.

In that affluent society the mineral boom was surging, and it was hard for some students to imagine the level of hardship and penury taken for granted in the 1930s. What, they asked, was a Depression like?

At the same time he noticed that the generation of his parents, those who were in the workforce (either as employees or as unpaid homemakers) during the 1930s, were beginning to grow old and die, their experiences unrecorded. As he said, "These experiences had somehow to be captured for the enlightenment of a generation who did not know what a depression was like."

That passage, for me, captures his early awareness that history helps us understand both the past and the future and Geoffrey's life and work exemplified that in spades.

As a relatively new ABC radio producer in the late 1970s, Bill wanted to make a series of radio features based on oral history about 20th century Australian history. He began with a program called 'They Said You'd Own Your Farm', and that was where *A Fine Country To Starve In* came in. Having already written that graphic account of WA during the Great Depression, Geoffrey agreed to record an interview about [Group Settlement](#). The Depression had come hard on the heels of Group Settlement and had affected its

outcome considerably. Bill used Geoffrey's comments as a narration framework in the broadcast, parts of which he played during his August presentation. He said:

Geoffrey's use of Oral History had inspired me to use it in its primary role – voices to be heard on the radio and I'd been fortunate in finding a pioneer in written history. But Geoffrey was also a natural on radio.

His presence on air, together with his astute and often non-judgmental comments on the achievements and the errors of our history enriched the ABC's Social History Unit's 'Talking History' and 'Hindsight' for the next 25 years.

To illustrate Geoffrey's background and early influences, Bill played an extract from *Historian at work* – Geoffrey Bolton. Beginning with his family history and ending with his time as a university student, it led to an extract about Geoffrey's book [Daphne Street](#). The family home was located in that North Perth street, and Bill remarked that:

Geoffrey's sense of the past came to include its ambivalence and complexity as that extract suggests. The Depression was uneven in its effects.

But his early interest in history was also kindled by a good library at home.

And here we heard more from Geoffrey about the books, people and courses that led to him seeing history as a story, a continuous narrative that was supported by the experience of so-called 'ordinary people'. Bill then continued:

And what kind of history? The land of our enormous continent had much to say to him and especially the vast space of Western Australia. And he wanted to catch 'Living History' memories which could still be recalled.

In 1952, for his [Masters' thesis](#), he took himself to the Kimberley to record the story of North West pastoralism. In [Broome](#) his first call was to the writer [Mary Durack](#).

(Track 8—Meeting Mary Durack) Geoffrey: She was, as was a habit for many years, spending the winter up in Broome, and it was known that her father [M. P. Durack](#) who died only two years previously was one of those admirable systematic people who kept a diary every day of his life, from the time he was twenty-one until the time he died at eighty-five. And I wanted to get access to these things. Incidentally Mary kept up the same habit, so there would be a great treasure house in her diaries as well. And I called on her, and I think she was sitting at her desk when I first saw her; what you'd describe as a comely, friendly woman, about not quite forty, I guess, at that stage.

There were small children evident in the background but they seemed to wash round her feet without causing any great disruption in the conversation. And she was very kind, very interested in what I was trying to do; thought it was a great idea, and, far from worrying whether I was a trespasser on her patch, because she was writing [Kings in Grass Castles](#) at that time, gave me every help; and of course the diaries did turn out to be a great treasure trove.

But also, she was encouraging in two other ways. One was that she gave me introductions to people in the Kimberleys; and, if Mary Durack said I was all right, then I was all right. And the other thing was that I couldn't have anyone better to talk about the whole background. She knew it all, particularly in the East Kimberley, very well indeed, and she was a wonderful person to bounce ideas off.

At that point, Bill resumed the story:

Fifty two years later, in 2004, Geoffrey was again back in the East Kimberley.

We were recording the changes brought by the [damming of the Ord River](#) 40 years earlier.

(Track 9—Ord River 40 Years On) Geoffrey: Well it's a very odd experience because I was last here in 1952 when I was collecting material for a Masters thesis on the Kimberley pastoral industry, and of course that was well before the lake. [Argyle homestead](#) was in its original situation, and it's an eerie experience to be on a boat in the lake sailing over a place which you last knew as a working cattle station, a homestead, with the bulldust and the ringers and the general activity.

Bill: It's an extraordinary experience to be standing here isn't it, because to our south, as you say, you've got drowned pastoral country, but if we turn round, and we can see beyond these mountains, we'd be looking at a vast area of irrigated river flats which have now been watered by the Ord. So in a sense the losing of the pastoral country to this dam is a creation of another kind of history, isn't it?

Geoffrey: Well, it is a history and hasn't been told very much until now; but the idea that there would be [agriculture](#) on the Ord was always there. Even as early as 1885 one of the very first surveyors commented that the Ord could very well be dammed, and of course the person who really brought the idea into practicality was [Kim Durack](#), the second son of old M. P. Durack, one of the pioneering family that had been here since the beginning of pastoral settlement, and Kim worked here for a number of years, and grew the first rice, and the first experimental plots of cotton, and various other things.

Back to Bill:

For me Geoffrey's knowledge of the Kimberley had already come in very handy in 2001. I was then making a 3 part radio series on the impact of the [1965 Equal Wage Case](#), called [It's Not The Money It's The Land](#).

In the first program I wanted to trace the way in which the Kimberley Aboriginal groups adapted to the pastoral industry in the late 19th century.

Geoffrey suggested interestingly that the Aboriginal people took up aspects of pastoralism as soon as the first white cattlemen arrived.

(Track 10—Aboriginal Stockyards) Geoffrey: Aborigines in the north were very quick to adapt western technology, and this ranges from being able to ride horses, which they'd never seen before of course, to the fact that, even before they came in, they looked at stockyards and said "we can build stockyards", and they were using them to impound cattle, which they had pinched from the interloping pastoralists.

Bill: Where they could capture cattle, they were setting up their own mustering set-ups.

Geoffrey: There was certainly evidence of that. That was reported by police and graziers, they'd find these stockyards that they hadn't built.

And, again, back to Bill:

One advantage of working with Geoffrey Bolton was not just his knowledge of place but also people.

Working at the Australian National University in Canberra he'd known historians like [Manning Clark](#) and the remarkable anthropologist of Aboriginal culture, [Bill Stanner](#). In yet another program – on Stanner himself I was grateful for Geoffrey's insight into the famous anthropologist's other skills.

(Track 11—Bill Stanner)

Another advantage of working with Geoffrey was his sense of the significance of location. He often had something provocative to say about any part of Australia he found himself in.

(Track 12—Alice Springs)

And here's a story about a much more far flung location.

In the 1970s, as part of Murdoch University's contacts with Asia, Geoffrey, in company with 3 fellow academics travelled through China.

As he recalled the journey it raised 'questions of protocol'.

(Track 13—Travel Through China)

Earlier in this recapture of Geoffrey Bolton's work I've illustrated his abiding interest in social history; which, by the way, extended to Environmental History, in his books [Land of Vision and Mirage](#), and [Spoils and Spoilers](#).

But he constantly reminded his readers and his listeners of 'Big Picture' History as well. In 1996 he helped me out with a radio series called Unfinished Business, taking a look at incomplete strands of Australian history; [Reconciliation](#) with the First Australians, the current [Constitution](#) and the often less well known story of [Republicanism](#).

In this context I wanted to know whether [Eureka Stockade](#) of 1854, played any role in this story. I assumed there might be just one link.

(Track 14—Eureka Meanings)

An illustration of his prodigious memory for detail.

One of Geoffrey's abiding interests was the growth of Australia as a nation. And he saw the first decade after Federation, as holding out promise, even if sadly and rapidly curtailed.

(Track 15—Bright Dawn)

Geoffrey was as ambitious for [history](#) as he was for his own contribution to its content; an issue I explored in his own work as an historian. How did he see the current state of his own discipline?

(Track 16—History Today)

And there was another useful lesson in the way he saw how historians ... could easily categorise people.

(Track 17—Victim History) Geoffrey: I think there was a tendency in the 1980s to write victim history. Younger historians very sensibly thought that there was a risk that history could be too triumphalist, that it could celebrate simply the winners and the successes, and, in some cases, I mean there was a thing called *The People's History*, which was brought out in 1988 in four volumes. Reading it, you might get the impression that the working class, that the Aborigines, the migrants never won, that they were always victimised. This struck me as condescending because so often, even the poorer, less unfortunate of us have strategies which enable them to survive, and enable them to make a go of it. And the challenge is I think, not to ignore or to pretend they didn't happen, the injustices, the foolishnesses, but also to remember the resilience of the ordinary person. And that's what I tried to do with *A Fine Country To Starve In*, and that's what I wanted to do in anything I write like that.

Given his innovative role at [Murdoch](#) I'd been asked to record his campus memories as part of the commemoration of Murdoch University's 40th anniversary.

I'd asked him about the choice of the Murdoch name. ... And as with Eureka...

(Track 18—Naming Murdoch)

So far I haven't included Geoffrey Bolton's work as a biographer. His work here examined the life and careers of Alexander Forrest; later, Australia's first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton; and much more recently, his biography of Paul Hasluck, journalist, public servant, politician and Governor General.

(Track 19—But For A Lift)

I'd like to conclude with some personal memories.

At the ABC I sometimes helped high school students seeking work experience. On one occasion I told a 15 year old girl that as part of my working day I was meeting Professor Bolton for lunch at a nearby café to plan a program and I was sure he wouldn't mind if she came and listened in.

He didn't. We discussed the radio feature but he also took time to ask her about her interests, what she wanted to do with her life and gave her good advice about career prospects.

She said to me as we walked back, "I didn't know University professors were like that. He could have been my grandfather."

And wherever you went in his company there was the same ease of communication and friendliness. We were sometimes invited in a country town to give a talk about what we were doing there.

Geoffrey could not only talk at any length without notes and, while he sometimes knew more about the place than the locals, he never showed it.

Swinging his long legs over a table he could regale them with yarns they hadn't always heard before.

And he could while away any long car journey with snatches of bush poems and comic limericks. He was at ease with people from any background; always a natural teacher; one who made you aware of complexity and ambivalence. But you never felt you were being lectured, simply being interestingly entertained.

I was greatly privileged to have worked with him, learnt from him and to have enjoyed his wit, **width**, warmth and wisdom.

Thank you for sharing my memories of a remarkable historian and a gracious and kindly human being.

Cathie Clement (drawing on Bill Bunbury's script)