

Donovan News

Priceless

An Occasional Publication

Autumn, 1988

Introduction

This newsletter is a report on the recent activities of **Donovan and Associates**. Through it we hope to maintain contact with our growing list of clients.

During the course of our projects many of which continue during several months we usually develop a close relationship between ourselves and key members within the client's organisation. Thus the conclusion of any project is always tinged with a little regret. Because of this we continue to take an interest in the activities of these organisations, and we hope that many people within them might also be pleased to hear occasionally of the activities of **Donovan and Associates**.

In most instances during the course of a project our clients see only one aspect of our work. Through the newsletter we would also like to inform them and others of the many related services that we have to offer. We would hope that they might consider using us again, and recommend us to others.

Another important purpose on the newsletter, however, is to act as an advocate in the cause of history. When we describe ourselves as historians many people express surprise that there is a living to be made in the real world. The general impression is that historians are retiring dons beaver- ing away in academic institutions on projects that have little bearing on the current world. Because of this popular

perception public historians have a major problem in convincing others that historians can make a valuable contribution to the present and future well-being of companies and organisations.

So, besides recounting our recent triumphs we would also like to use the newsletter to report on developments in Public History generally and to give examples of the manner in which the services provided by historians are being put to good use in business and elsewhere. This commentary will be found in the separate liftout section.



They Said It - 1

In the 27 January, 1988 issue of *Australian Business*, regular columnist Noel Bushnell devoted an article to the necessity of a historical sense in business. 'Studying history is anything but a wallow in nostalgia' he said. 'History underpins cultures, helps you find your place in the world and where you might be going, in companies no less than anywhere else'. He went on to quote Melbourne businessman Geoff Brash. 'Our eyes are on the future. But history is a necessary ingredient of success'.



Publications

South Australia's Jubilee 150 year was a busy one for **Donovan and Associates** with publications. During that year four books were published. The more important ones were the History of West Torrens, that of the South Australian Gas Company, and our colour book on Stained Glass in South Australia.

Of course this flood of publications simply represented the product of a good deal of work that had been going on quietly for several years. It was a coincidence that so much of it should come out in such a short period.

Thus 1987 was a much quieter year, though it still saw two more books published. Early in the year there was published a small booklet devoted to *Writing Local History*. It was written as a course guide for the Adelaide College of TAFE, and because of this it is not a book that will receive a wide circulation.

In November, however, the Premier, Mr Bannon, launched *Towards Excellence*. This is the story of Bert Baulderstone and the building company that he founded: it seeks to explain why this company, only one of a number of small building firms in South Australia in 1946, should outstrip all others and be the State's leading building firm only forty years later.

This was the second of our corporate histories, and

the opportunity was taken to explore some of the concepts touched upon but not developed in the history of SAGASCO.

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This Bicentennial year looks like being a another bumper year for publications with another three due to be launched.

First in line is *Waltzing Matildas: the Men and Machines of the 2/9th Australian Armoured Regiment*. This book is to be launched on the Saturday before Anzac Day by Major-General Ronald Hopkins who was responsible for raising the Armoured Corps during World War II. It was written on behalf of members of the Regimental Group Association, of which June's father is a member.

Because *Waltzing Matildas* has been written more than forty years after the war, and by one of another generation, it is quite different from other unit histories. It is not much concerned with grand strategy and battlefield tactics for indeed, the unit did not go into action until the last months of the Pacific War. It is instead a social history of the men of the unit, its purpose being to tell those of the present generation what it was that their fathers did during the war.

It will be something of a race to see what book follows *Waltzing Matildas*. The manuscript of the *History of Alice Springs* has been completed for some time, but it is only recently that arrangements have been concluded for its production. It is hoped to have it ready by November in order to coincide with the centenary of the surveying of the town.

The other book is the history of *Australian National*. The manuscript is virtually complete. A 'problem' in putting the finishing touches to it has been the number of changes made to the key personnel responsible for the organisation. This book looks at the first decade of Australian National, and seeks to make an assessment of the efforts made during this time to turn the railway into a commercially profitable operation.

Like our other corporate histories, it highlights the importance of 'corporate culture'. However, where the *Unquenchable Flame* described the long-time development of a culture, and *Towards Excellence* was concerned with the establishment of a culture, the history of Australian National assesses efforts to change a culture, from that of 'the railways' to that of a dynamic commercial organisation.



They Said It - 2

When speaking to the International Cargo Handling Co-ordination Association in Hobart on 15 November 1985, Dr Don Williams, then General Manager of Australian National said that 'It has sometimes seemed to me that modern business history would be a better discipline for managers than the hard nosed stuff like accountancy and economics. It's all happened before and usually becomes a matter of how best to adapt past experience to the current problems - with a modicum of audacity thrown in.'



Heritage & Museum Projects

Besides the strictly historical work, **Donovan and Associates** has also been involved in several other interesting projects during the past few months.

One of the major projects was a heritage survey of the town of Peterborough. This was funded largely by a grant from the Australian Heritage Commission under the National Estate Grants Programme.

The purpose of the survey was to assess the heritage significance of the town and its building stock.

Peterborough has been an important town in South Australia, primarily because of its identification with the railways. The railways have sustained the town during periods of rural recession that have adversely affected other country towns. Now with the continued drive of Australian National for increased efficiencies, Peterborough is feeling the chill winds.

A feature of the town is the main street. However, the downturn in business there has seen the closing of many stores and a contraction of activity to the western end. It seemed to us that Peterborough provided an admirable opportunity for the local business community to consider the benefits of a Main Street programme, similar to those so successfully implemented in many cities and towns in the United States.

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Another key project was the provision of a development and management plan for the Homestead Park Pioneer Museum at Port Augusta. Once

again, the local government body was the client.

Homestead Park, while containing several valuable items, suffered from problems similar to many, if not most, of the local museums in South Australia. The museum received few visitors and was already a drain on Council's resources. The fear was that it would become even less attractive once the new Wadlata Outback Interpretation Centre had opened.

Our task was to provide a vision for the museum, and a staged programme whereby this might be realised. In essence it provided for the reorganisation and rationalisation of the collection that would highlight the features of the museum and give it an identity separate from, but complementary to the interpretation centre.



They Said It - 3

A correspondent writing in the January-February 1982 issue of the *Harvard Business Review* recounted the story of 'the CEO of a prominent company [who] scoffed at a business historian who was attempting to explain some possible applications of business history. "I don't want people wasting time on the past," he declared. "I'm trying to get them to pay attention to the future." "Then," replied the historian, "you can be replaced with an 18-year old!"'



People

Peter and June Donovan travelled overseas again late last year. The occasion was to attend the General Assembly of ICOMOS, the international guardian of correct building conservation philosophy, in Washington, D.C.. The opportunity of the trip was taken to renew acquaintances with several of the leading public historians who are practicing in the United States. Those visited included **Bob Pomeroy** in Cornish, Maine, who is Secretary/Treasurer of the **National Center for the Study of History**, **David Allen** vice-president of the **Winthrop Group** that is based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, an association of consultants that specialises in the historical analysis of business and organisational problems, and **Philip Cantelon**, president of **History Associates Incorporated**, of Rockville, Maryland, another consulting firm that in 1986 was number 302 of America's 500 fastest growing private companies. Before returning home, the Donovans also attended the third Heritage of the Asian and Pacific Islands Colloquium on the island of Kauai, in Hawaii, where Peter presented a paper on aspects of heritage conservation in Australia. Since returning, most attention has been given to current projects, though in February, Peter Donovan attended the biennial conference of the Australian Historical Association to present a paper on historians in business.

Noreen Kirkman who co-authored the history of the South Australian Gas Company has been busy with other projects. At the conclusion of the Gas Company project she returned to Mount Isa Mines as a librarian, but with the task of

writing a social history of the town. This was completed immediately before Christmas and is due for publication later this year.

Pamela Runge, another associated with the Gas Company project, and last year an important part of the team that advised Port Augusta City Council on future plans for the Homestead Park Pioneer Museum has been appointed Curator of the Art and Historical Collections at the University of Adelaide. Late last year she visited parts of Europe and North America to learn something of current trends in the curation and display of artworks. In Washington she met up with the Donovans and also attended the ICOMOS General Assembly.

Bernard O'Neill, a co-author of the Australian National history has recently left for Germany to attend the bi-centennial celebrations in honour of the birth of Johannes Menge in his hometown of Steinau, Hesse: Menge was born on 24 January, 1788 and baptised two days later. Bernie has been researching the life of Menge for several years and hopes to have this published. He has contributed material on Menge's Australian connection to people organising the celebrations in Steinau, and recently was instrumental in having Menge's contribution to South Australia recognised by the unveiling of a plaque in one of the cellar buildings at the Orlando winery at Rowland Flat. Bernie hopes to continue his research while in Germany, but will return before the launching of the Australian National history



They Said It - 4

In his book *Professing History*, **Kelth Hancock** made much of the value of a historical perspective. He remarked, that he whose 'perspective in time is shallow and whose perspective in space is narrow resembles a traveller entering an unknown territory with no other guide than one sheet of an inch-to-the-mile map. From the moment his journey leads him into country which the map does not cover he will be lost. Even within the narrow confines of what he is pleased to call 'my period' he may fail to see significance in the bits and pieces of knowledge which he has picked up'.



Released

At about Christmas time the report on the *Heritage of the Mound Springs* was finally released by the Department of Environment and Plan-

ning. It is an important multi-disciplinary report about one of the most important and fragile natural areas in South Australia, that of the Mound Springs on the south-western fringe of the Great Artesian Basin.

The four studies included assessments of the significance of the biology of the springs, the associated Aboriginal archaeology, the Aboriginal cultural significance of the springs, and the significance of items associated with the European exploration and settlement.

As sub-consultants for **Kinhill Stearns**, we were chiefly responsible for the latter study during 1984. Because they were such a valuable source of water in an arid environment, the springs were associated with the most significant events in the exploration and settlement of the interior. They helped determine the route for Stuart to cross the continent, and after him, the route of the Overland Telegraph, and later still the route on the railway to Alice Springs.

This work largely built

on our extensive experience with the history of the Northern Territory.

Yet to be released is the similar multi-disciplinary study into the significance of the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Region in western New South Wales. This is the only one of Australia's world heritage sites listed because of its cultural significance, in this case because it is the site of the oldest known human remains in Australia.

In this instance we were the principal consultants charged with the identification and assessment of the items associated with the European exploration and settlement of the region.

This report was one of several undertaken for the New South Wales Department of Environment and Planning.



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Historians and Business

There is an old adage that those who forget the lessons of the past are condemned to repeat its mistakes. This applies to the leaders of companies as it does to the leaders of society generally. In any organisation people come and go, but all make a contribution, whether for good or ill. However, unless efforts are made to record and learn from this contribution, the value of any accumulated knowledge is quickly lost and a company may continue to repeat mistakes made in the past.

Few managers would dispute the importance of history, but there are also very few who have an appreciation of precisely what it can do for them.

Benefits of a sense of history

A sense of history is important for all business managers, particularly for those concerned with human resource management. Much of the history of any organisation is concerned with people and their attitudes, and it is through people that managers must continue to work.

An appreciation of the past makes it easier for executives to confront, understand, and manage change, for there is no change that does not have deep roots in the past. Moreover, a sense of history can help to identify those factors that might foster or hinder desired change within and without any organisation.

Clearly, history does not repeat itself, and a knowledge of the past will not provide ready-made answers for the future: to use Mark Twain's idea, history does not always rhyme. However, managers with an understanding of the manner in which their organisations have developed, or an appreciation of the way situations have arisen, will be better equipped to make sound decisions that affect the future.

The role of Historians

Professional historians alive to the needs of managers are able to provide this understanding and a sense of temporal perspective.

However, historians can be of far more practical value to organisations than in simply canonising the corporate memory in impressive looking volumes. They can also help managers to focus on current issues, decisions and problems.

United States' experience

In the United States where Business History and so-called Public or Applied History has been longer established, managers have already gained a greater appreciation of the utility of the historians' skills in the day-to-day management of their organisations.

When writing in the *Harvard Business Review* in November - December, 1981 George Smith and Laurence Steadman indicated that historians had already established their utility in corporate training programmes, in helping to provide a firmer base for corporate planning for the future, and even in providing vital background on many current problems that managers were keen to resolve, particularly in the area of human resource development.

While not identifying the company concerned, they gave an example of what they considered 'one of the most powerful managerial applications of historical thinking we have found.'

Briefly, what in the 1960s was established as a model factory, fifteen years later had gone bad, with morale and production down. Because people began speaking nostalgically of the 'good old days' the manager hired a social scientist rather than a management consultant to address the problem. Through his historical research and interviews, he was able to reconstruct the manner in which the plant had gone bad and established 'that the organisation and its products had grown old together.' However, with all parties working together solutions were found, and, 'Using the original technology with some modifications, the plant is now a very strong generator of income, producing some of the highest-margin products of the company overall.'

Paraphrasing the plant manager of more than a decade Smith and Steadman contended 'that charting the plant's history gives people a sense of what has happened in "real time" - an experience of the company larger than their own participation in it or perceptions of it. Those involved thus came to understand the significance of events they had lived through, whose underlying meaning they had not sensed at the time'.

As Smith and Steadman demonstrated, historians can fulfil many other useful roles. They are able to help provide the material and themes to underpin distinctive marketing and advertising strategies. And besides helping to promote its products this same distinctiveness can also be used to promote the corporation and its values in the community. On other occasions, when it is necessary, historians are able to provide valuable legal support.

Helping to manage change

Historians are masters of change, for their primary concern is to record, analyse and explain it. This can be put to good effect in any organisation.

By emphasising the change that an organisation has undergone in the past, historians can help to disabuse people of the notion that current practices and structures are necessarily the best and therefore immutable. They can thereby help prepare people for renewed change.

At the same time historians can analyse and perhaps explode those myths and traditions that pervade most organisations and serve to inhibit desired change. An explanation of the reasons for, and the manner in which many long-time practices were introduced, makes it easier for all concerned to confront the current problems that they pose and to seek solutions more appropriate to present circumstances.

On the other hand during a time of rapid change when many attitudes, traditions and practices are rejected simply because they are old, a historian can help differentiate those that are important to an organisation and should be retained, from those that are unimportant and should be jettisoned. In times of rapid change people appreciate some constants with which they can identify.

Help in problem solving

Trained historians are equipped with numbers of skills that are valued in business but rarely sought in a historian. Besides well honed skills in research, historians are also skilled in analysis. Their training has been concerned with an analytic approach to problem solving, and stressed the critical use of evidence.

Thus, historians can also be particularly useful in researching the recent history of specific issues, the preparation of case studies and position papers for discussion. Companies often abandon one structural or organisational form for another, or embark on a new marketing programme, unmindful that the preferred option of today was perhaps considered unsuitable earlier. A historian's perspective might help to highlight and avoid problems likely to be encountered in many new initiatives.

Finally, no less important is the historian's skills in writing. A major problem of management is the want of clear communication. Historians are trained to present their research in a clear fashion, free of the sort of jargon that characterises most professionals. In many instances, managers would have more success in communicating with the several parts of the organisation were they to use the services of a historian.

When concluding their article Smith and Steadman affirmed 'Once a company takes the three basic steps toward making its history useful - establishing the high value-added uses of the company history, identifying and rationalizing its historical resources for current and future use, and developing specific programs and studies - it will find that it has acquired a powerful management tool. While we do not imagine that our own enthusiasm alone will convince skeptics or convert ahistorical managers, we can at least suggest that executives take a preliminary look at their corporate histories in terms of costs and benefits. If they do this seriously and conscientiously, they can assess both. We are confident they will find that the benefits dominate'.

