

# Donovan News

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Celebrating Thirteen Years of Donovan & Associates

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... keeping in touch with clients and other friends ...

## Little histories are important

In history, as in many other endeavours, big is not always the best. Quite often our clients have in mind a large, impressive looking volume when they think about commissioning the history of a company or organisation. In many instances they might consider commissioning such a history in order to celebrate an anniversary or highlight the achievements of their predecessors - and themselves - so a large volume might seem appropriate. However, in considering that historians are good only for writing large volumes, clients miss out on much of what historians have to offer.

One of the first things that a historian must do when sitting down to write a history is to consider the reader. If potential clients were to do the same they would realise that they can use the history of their organisation in several ways, although in each instance they will require a different product.

A short history of an organisation that explains the ideals of the founder, its later development, its traditions and the achievements of individuals to help induct recruits into the organisation and its culture, would be a very useful tool at workshop as well as at management level.

A series of historical essays appropriate for a newsletter that focussed on, and explained, the manner in which a company has adapted to change in the past might help the organisation implement future changes.

History can also be written for senior managers. For instance, a short history that sought to explain the success - or failure - of key initiatives of the company might become an important document to help managers formulate future policies. An analysis of the culture of the organisation might form the basis for a new marketing strategy or for identifying new directions. A historian's skills might prove valuable in a court action.

The above is a small range of the different types of corporate histories that might be written. All would differ from one another except for the essential background. None need be very large. But all could be used for the benefit of the company, and would perhaps be more effective than a large impressive-looking volume that few people would be persuaded to read.



## PROJECT UPDATE

**Donovan & Associates** has continued to be active on several fronts since the previous **News**.

Work on the history of the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital was completed on schedule and the book was launched at the Annual General Meeting at the Hospital on 26 October 1992.



*The Honourable Peter Howson, a past president of the Hospital Board, who launched the book, with Peter Donovan.*

Dame Nancy Buttfield's autobiography, *Dame Nancy*, which was produced by **D & A** from a series of interviews undertaken by June Donovan, was launched by Jennifer Cashmore at the Naval, Military and Air Force Club on Dame Nancy's 80th birthday on 12 November 1992. June later spoke about Dame Nancy's political career to members of the Historical Society of South Australia at their May meeting.

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## Project Update continued

**D & A** also published a book immediately before Christmas. *So, You want to write History?* was written by Peter Donovan as a private endeavour over several years. The book is illustrated by Stephen Stanley whose cartoons appear in the **News**. Stephen is more renowned for his Lafferty comic strip that appears in several Australian newspapers. The book is being distributed nationally by Hyland House of Melbourne.

Meanwhile, work on the history of Roche Bros has continued, along with the history of the O'Neill family, both of which are reported upon in more detail in this **News**.

One interview remains to complete the SAGASCO Resources oral history project which we are undertaking with Bernard O'Neil.

**D & A** also completed an oral history of the Athelstone section of the River Torrens Valley for the Engineering and Water Supply Department. With Land Systems EBC, the department is developing the River Torrens Linear Park and believed it was important to record the recollections of early life in the valley from several long-time residents.

Another job successfully completed included the production of the colour brochure for the City of West Torrens in order to commemorate the opening of the Civic Centre on 7 February.

**D & A** has also been working with architect, Barry Rowney, who was commissioned to provide a conservation plan for St Laurence's Church and Priory at North Adelaide, and also to provide an assessment of the West Terrace Cemetery, both sites with which we are familiar from earlier projects.

## The Roche Approach



In many ways the story of the Roche Bros reflects that of other Irish families whose ancestors migrated to Australia in search of a better life and who went on to achieve great success. However, the Roches are special in that their success has been based on the skill with which they have been able to dig holes and move dirt and rock. Using some of the largest machines available, Roche Bros now does this as good or better than other contractors and civil engineers in Australia.

The first of the Roches to migrate to Australia from Ireland did so in the 1840s immediately prior to the gold rushes, although it was 1921 when, with the encouragement of their father, Jim, Fred and Vic Roche won a contract to build an earth-formed road from Buxton to Marysville in the high country to the east of Melbourne.

The business grew steadily until the death of Fred Roche in 1931, at the time of the depression, when it ceased business in all but name. The youngest brother, Jim Roche, joined Vic in 1936 and the business was reinvigorated with the young Jim taking the role of general manager. The continued success of the firm and the development of its particular culture was largely dependent upon the efforts and attitudes of Jim Roche. His family assumed total control of the company in 1978.

The story is a fascinating one. Success did not come easily. There were many occasions when the company nearly failed: on one occasion the company had cash reserves to pay its men for only one week's work and was saved only by securing a new contract. Unforeseen difficulties meant that some of the projects proved disastrous and lost money. Yet the successes have far outnumbered the failures and senior management has been astute enough to learn from earlier mistakes, ensuring that Roche Bros has survived - even prospered - when larger competitors have faltered and many have disappeared. All the while the company has maintained and enhanced its reputation for probity.

The company has also been astute in assessing future markets for its expertise and led other contractors into the use of large equipment, particularly in contract mining. Thus, Roche Bros has played a major part in the development of the Big Pit at Kalgoorlie. Its reputation has also meant that it was sought as a joint venture partner by international interests who were successful in bidding for the tender to construct the platform for the new Hong Kong airport.

Roche Bros has become one of Australia's major civil engineering and contract mining companies while yet remaining a private company wholly owned by the family.

## Sons and Brothers

It is co-incidental that while undertaking the Roche story, Donovan & Associates should also be asked to write the history of the O'Neil family. In so many respects the stories are similar. The O'Neil story is also that of the descendants of an Irish immigrant making good. And, while the Roches made their fortune in civil engineering and contract mining, the O'Neils made their fortune by quarrying, and later by moving into the ready-mixed concrete business. The business success of the families began at much the same time also, with the O'Neils embarking on quarrying and contracting in South Australia in the early 1920s. Yet the stories are different in significant respects.

The key feature of the O'Neil story is the manner in which seven brothers should be able to work together so closely in the one business. This solidarity enabled the family to extend their business into Western Australia in 1931 in the face of entrenched competitors. The willingness of the brothers to work together also underpinned the successful expansion to Sydney in 1939 and the return to Adelaide in 1952, again, despite entrenched local interests.

The O'Neil company, Australian Blue Metal (ABM), prospered in the post-World War II period and became one of Australia's major quarrying companies, with interests stretching from Western Australia to New South Wales, South Australia and the Northern Territory. In addition to the core quarrying business, the O'Neils also became the Australian agents for Foden trucks which they used exclusively in their own operations, and they were also Western Australian agents for Mercedes and Rolls Royce motor cars.

Unlike Roche Bros, the O'Neils floated ABM as a public company in order to attract the capital for continued expansion. Development continued until the early 1960s when ABM expanded into the area of ready-mixed concrete. By this time, however, it was evident that the company had become too large and complex to be managed as it had been to that time and the O'Neils actively pursued merger talks with Ready Mixed Concrete. The latter acquired the interests of ABM in March 1961.

The brothers found it difficult to work with the new management and within two years all had resigned from the company and divested themselves of their shareholdings. They did so with a measure of relief. Each of the brothers then established businesses of their own for their own families.

The comparisons and the contrasts with the Roche story are fascinating and, taken together, the two histories reflect a great deal about the challenges of founding, developing and managing private and public companies and issues associated with growth and succession.



## NEW PROJECTS

In addition to projects undertaken in association with Barry Rowney and Bernard O'Neil, **Donovan & Associates** has won others in its own right since the previous *News*.

Perhaps the most significant of the new projects is a commission to undertake an oral history of the Australian Medical Association (AMA). The AMA, which was formed in 1961, is eager to collect and preserve information from members who were active in the formation of the AMA and who may have played significant roles in many of the key issues addressed since that time. Our work on the history of the Eye and Ear Hospital has already given us an appreciation of many of these issues.

**Donovan & Associates** has also been engaged by the City Council of Enfield to document in detail the Sewage Farm which operated at Islington from 1881 to 1968. The surviving complex is included on the Register of State Heritage Items and is now under the control of the Council. It is presently being conserved as a restaurant and reception centre and as a headquarters for the Enfield Historical Society.

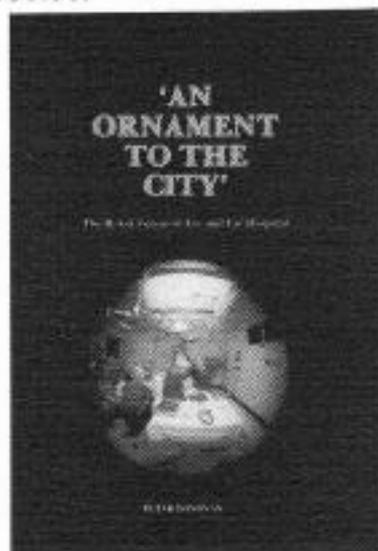
## WORK EXPERIENCE

In early May, **Donovan & Associates** once again hosted a student wishing to gain some experience in the work of history consulting. On this occasion, Clair Robson, currently in Year 10 at Heathfield High School took the opportunity to learn about the business of history and historic preservation.

## NEW BOOKS

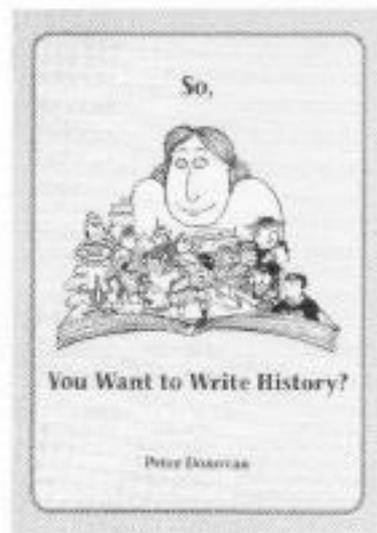
New books by **Donovan & Associates** since the previous *News* include:

*"an Ornament to the City" a history of the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital* was commissioned by the hospital and written by Peter Donovan to commemorate 125 years of the board. It is a hardback book of 265+xii pages, is illustrated and includes an index. The book is available from the hospital in Melbourne at \$39.95.



*Dame Nancy: The Autobiography of Nancy Buttfield* was launched in November. Although Dame Nancy's own story, the book was written from a series of oral interviews undertaken by June Donovan, with additional research being undertaken by June. This is a hardback book of 264+viii pages; it is illustrated and indexed. The project was essentially a private one by Dame Nancy for the benefit of her family and friends, but copies of the book may still be available from Dame Nancy at \$39.95.

*So, You want to write History?* was written by Peter Donovan particularly to encourage younger tertiary history students to consider careers in history and also to encourage amateur, but serious, historians to write better history. The book draws upon his 20 years' experience of working as a public historian. This is a paperback book of 98+viii pages featuring cartoons by Stephen Stanley to illustrate the text. The book, published by **Donovan & Associates**, retails for \$14.95.



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