

Donovan News

Number 8

Celebrating Eleven Years of Donovan & Associates

Spring 1991

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

HISTORY IS NOT BOUND BY TIME

The history of a company or organisation should be seen as a valuable tool of management, not simply as an upmarket means of marking an anniversary.

Managers fail to maximise the benefits of recording the history of their companies and organisations believing that a history project is most appropriately undertaken at the time of an approaching anniversary. An anniversary is certainly an appropriate time to celebrate an organisation's achievements, but to consider corporate histories only in this manner is to squander many of the benefits provided by a study of the organisation's past, particularly because anniversaries do not always coincide with significant developments within the organisation.

The history of an organisation should be undertaken whenever the time is appropriate and when the history will be of particular benefit to the organisation. Thus our history of A.W. Boulderstone Pty Ltd was commissioned soon after the company merged with a major international construction firm and a long-time Australian construction company. A major aim of the project was to record the early history of the company before it was lost and before the company's culture changed dramatically with the mergers. Other aims were to recognise the achievements of those long associated with the company and to inform those in the other organisations about the particular Boulderstone culture.

In a similar fashion, 1990 was an appropriate time to prepare a history of the South Australian Highways Department although it bore no relationship to any anniversary. Late in 1989, road-related divisions of the Department of Transport were added to the Highways Department which changed its name to the Department of Road Transport. The essential work of the Department continued much as it had done for several years. However, many in the Department had grown concerned at the increasing number of changes which culminated in the change of name. A major theme of the project has been to emphasise the continuity of the essential work of the Department while showing that change has always been a feature and crucial to its survival.

Corporate and organisational history projects come in all manner of forms. They need not always be seen as published books.



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PEOPLE

Those who contribute to **Donovan & Associates** seem to be a peripatetic lot.

Soon after the publication of the previous **News**, **Barry Rowney** journeyed to Italy once again as part of the team from the Classics Department of the University of Adelaide to measure and draw several buildings from the classical Roman period. The Gulf War caused the postponement of his plans to return to Syria with the archaeology team from the Australian National University until last September.

Spring also saw **Patricia Sumerling** head off overseas. Her primary reason was to visit family in Britain, although she has also taken the opportunity to research some of the early history of South Australia from sources in Britain.

At this year's annual general meeting of the Association of Professional Historians, **Bernie O'Neill** was elected president for the ensuing year. He has had a busy time of it representing the Association in the electronic and print media. In October he presided over an important meeting organised by the Association to explore issues associated with the State government's privacy principles.

Peter Donovan visited New Zealand last May as a guest of the New Zealand Historical Association to speak at the

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People continued

Association's conference in Christchurch, which had as one of its themes, 'History in the Community'. He spoke about the opportunities for freelance historians and issues associated with establishing a history business. He later travelled to Wellington at the invitation of the History Unit of the Department of Internal Affairs to meet historians working for the Unit and to exchange ideas about writing commissioned histories. Peter also took the opportunity to meet several people who are working in the field of heritage conservation in New Zealand.

Conferences have figured prominently in the diaries of several **D & A** people this year. Soon after returning from New Zealand, Peter Donovan travelled to Sydney to attend the conference organised to celebrate a century of history teaching at the University of Sydney. In mid-October both he and Bernie O'Neil visited Sydney for the Railway Heritage Conference organised by Australia ICOMOS and the NSW State Rail Authority. Peter delivered a paper outlining some of the recommendations flowing from **D & A's** railway heritage survey. The following week he also spoke at the National Trust's railway heritage conference in Adelaide which the Trust arranged to take advantage of the visit to Adelaide of Leslie Soane, a director of the British Railway Heritage Trust, and also to report results of the heritage survey.

Alison Painter has almost completed work on her history of the Blackwood Recreation Centre which was commissioned by the Centre's management committee. It is hoped to have the history published by Christmas.

D & A IS INTO TRAINING



One of our current major projects is the assessment of the heritage significance of South Australia's surviving railway structures. As our previous *News* reported, this project is being undertaken on behalf of the National Trust. The team includes Peter Donovan, Patricia Sumerling, Bernie O'Neil, Barry Rowney and Graham Boulter.

The project has two major components: the first being the identification and physical assessment of the surviving railway heritage in South Australia and the second being the identification of strategies calculated to help to conserve the most significant of these heritage items.

The identification of the surviving railway heritage has taken members of the team all over South Australia and has included a trip across the Nullarbor Plain alongside the Transcontinental railway. Although such fieldwork is frequently the most enjoyable part of any heritage survey, the identification of conservation strategies is undoubtedly the most important part of a project.

The railway system was fundamental to the economic and social development of colonial South Australia. During the twentieth century, road and air transport have taken much of the traffic traditionally carried by rail. In an endeavour to meet the challenge the various rail authorities have greatly rationalised work practices and the rail network. This is necessary if rail is to retain any economic viability. But, in the process, Society risks losing much of the railway heritage inadvertently.

Thus it is that the identification of conservation strategies for the surviving railway heritage is particularly important. The rail authorities maintain that they are not in the business of conserving built heritage that no longer has any utilitarian as far as they are concerned.

Our study has already shown that a great deal can be done to provide new uses for old railway property. Nevertheless, it is essential that all concerned, from government agencies to lobby and interest groups and private individuals, must shoulder part of the responsibility for the community to benefit.

The success of the project will be measured by the strategies proposed for the conservation of the significant railway heritage. Then it will be up to the community to adopt appropriate measures.



Graham Boulter beside the Transcontinental Line where south meets west

A NEW PERSPECTIVE



Daniel Fazio and Allison Painter delivering the Payneham School manuscript and illustrations to the Lutheran Publishing House.

One of the issues that historians find fascinating is the manner in which, subject to a new interpretation, hitherto unknown or apparently inconsequential matters become historical facts that may provide new insights into the interpretation of the past.

The authors of the history of **Payneham Primary School** recently had cause to highlight one of these sorts of facts. Unfortunately, only those interested in the history of the school - and readers of the *News* - will appreciate its significance.

The major contribution to Australian historiography of the Payneham School history may well be the fact that Prime Minister Harold Holt attended the school for a time in 1915 and 1916. The school records include the name of young Harold, his birthdate, the name of his father and the fact that he left Payneham and 'returned to Sydney'. The names and dates are identical to those found in biographies of Holt and it seems too coincidental that they should not refer to the same person.

The school discovered the 'facts' some years ago and has taken delight in the idea that it can number an Australian Prime Minister among its old boys. However, the authors of the history were more intrigued that Holt's attendance at the school or his period of residence in South Australia is not noted in any of the published biographies. Moreover, Holt was a politician, so it seems unusual that while campaigning in South Australia he apparently never referred to his early associations with South Australia.

This demands that one should ask the question 'Why was this so?'

Holt would have been a lad of seven or eight when he attended Payneham School so it is unlikely that he would forget the occasion, unless it was simply one of many schools he attended during his early years. But then he would have attended few schools in South Australia.

An apparent reluctance to admit to such humble beginnings elicits further questions about Harold Holt's ambitions and his sense of self esteem. His published biographies give very little detail about his life prior to his winning a scholarship to Wesley College in Melbourne from where he continued on to Melbourne University and a career in law and politics. One biographer suggested that Holt's father was a 'schoolteacher and theatre director' although Thomas Holt, the father of the Payneham School pupil, was noted as a publican, the licensee of the nearby Duke of Wellington Hotel.

The demands of the project prevented the authors from putting the issue beyond doubt, but other historians may be able to do so.

PROJECT UPDATE

The past few months have been very busy ones at **Donovan & Associates**, with several major projects at critical stages. The history of Payneham Primary School was completed and launched on 19 October at special 'Back to Payneham School' celebrations.

The history of the Highways Department has been completed and has been ushered through Griffin Press ready for publication early in November.

With Bernie O'Neil acting as editor and with control over design, **Donovan & Associates** has produced a report for the Connellan Airways' Trust which details the Trust's activities during its first 10 years.

Eddie Connellan's book *Failure of Triumph* which has been edited and introduced by Peter Donovan is due to go to the printers immediately.

Dame Nancy Buttfield's autobiography is also ready for publication.

New projects undertaken during the past few months include the preparation of a paper on local government and its relationship with other tiers of government which was commissioned by the National Museum of Australia as part of its endeavour to prepare display material for the Museum of Political History which is to be located in Canberra's Old Parliament House.

The Housing Trust of South Australia also commissioned **D & A** to record the reminiscences of a senior executive who retired recently in order to complement the historical material gathered at the time of the publication of the history of the Trust.

History is not bound by time (continued)

Rather than wait for a suitable anniversary, managers might have a historian gather data, record interviews, collect photographs of, say, the first 30 years of an organisation's history while the data and early participants are still readily available and the task is a relatively simple one. This data need not be published immediately, but it can serve as a resource for historical information about the organisation that might be used in promotional displays and in-house publications thus providing a firm basis for an extended history at some later date.



All too often we have found that the death of a founder or significant manager is the stimulus for commissioning a history of a firm or organisation. But by then a great deal of potential data has already been lost. Similarly, once a company has been merged with another, much of the early data is lost or destroyed.

An earlier client commissioned us to conduct a series of interviews during a 12-month period, to identify and collect material relevant to the early history of the organisation. At the end of that year we provided the company with a filing cabinet of material, a collection of taped interviews and transcripts, and a lengthy manuscript which effectively combined all the transcripts together with other important data on the early history of the organisation. This document is not a publishable manuscript in itself, but it provides a detailed and rough history of the organisation and is a source from which historical material can be mined at a later date.



The project succeeded in rescuing much of the important early history of the company, by way of interviews of personnel no longer associated with the organisation and the collection of documents which are generally of a more ephemeral form than that which are now produced. Once the time comes to publish a more comprehensive history it will be a relatively simple matter to rewrite and edit this early material and add the more readily available material appropriate to the later history of the company.

It makes good sense to collect historical material while it is readily available and the task is not unduly influenced by the need to meet a close publication deadline. It is a practical and economic step that all organisations should consider.



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