

‘We, the Keeper & Custodians’

Opening Address by Dr Kiera Lindsey, History Advocate,
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Trustees, Guardians, historians, educators, programmers - and new History Trust colleagues. What an honour it is to be entrusted as South Australia’s History Advocate. I would like to begin by thanking my new employers, as well as the Hon Blair Boyer MP, Minister for Education, the History Trust, and the South Australian Government for this exceptional privilege and opportunity.

Advocate is a rich word with an etymology dating back as far as the 14th century. It has its roots in Roman Law, where it was first used to describe a person who assisted others in having a voice and securing justice. Around the same period, the French adopted this word to refer to those who stepped forward to plead for and recommend others. The word eventually drifted into the English lexicon, where it came to describe those who interceded for others, as protectors and champions.

Here in twenty-first century Adelaide, the History Trust of South Australia has chosen ‘advocate’ to define a role that will help to steward the sharing and telling of South Australia’s past. It is anticipated that the History Advocate will:

- Champion history in all its explorations and expressions;
- Increase awareness of, and appreciation for, the state’s distinctive history;
- Empower all who live within the state’s borders to gain a greater sense of self, of community, and of shared identity;
- Explain past complexities in ways that foster wisdom and innovation in education, tourism, the arts and culture, and
- Help to make the stories of South Australia relevant across the world, for the world.

I love South Australia. Although I grew up in Melbourne and spent the past six years in Sydney, my family and I have returned to the state of festivals, and so many firsts, to call you our colleagues, collaborators, neighbours and friends. South Australia feels like home. I met my husband, Brian Marshall, in 2012, while we were both working at the University of South Australia. We were married two years later on a stormy afternoon in November, at a friend’s farm in the Adelaide Hills, where I arrived in a 1926 American Packard vintage car which, incidentally, I managed to borrow from the History Trust’s National Motor Museum. See, I really do get hands-on about our collections!

As your new Advocate, I want you to know how much I love this big brown and red land. Your Lofty mountain with Karrawirra Parri winding down and about the hills, then through the plains lands of the Kaurna people, where it is often reduced to not much more than a trickle during the hot times, known as Warltati, and can remain so throughout Partnati, the windy season, which whitefellas still call autumn. During Kudlila, also known as winter, this beautiful river fills again, so that by the time we get to Wirtuti –when the brooding skies are frequently animated with piturru (thunder) and karntu (lightning), freckled ducks and Hoary-headed Grebes can be seen nesting and feeding about its springtime banks.

When I first moved to South Australia in 2012, I was bowled over by this wide wild land, those raw coasts which stretch on and on and the fierce yet tender desert lands of the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara, the Adnymathanha, Akenta and Amarak. There was something about the sultry skies and marshy wetlands of the Coorong, home of the Ngarrindjeri, and I was equally astonished by the dramatic contrast between the bald hills and lush valleys of the Narungga, Ngadjuri and Nukunu, Parnkalla and Peramangk.

For the last six years, South Australia has been calling me home. I have longed for the smell of lemon-scented gums after rain. The sound of birds, raucous in their wet joy. The fall of light through the trees in the early morning and the way the late afternoon summer sun can blur and blend the blue of the sea and sky into an endless horizon of shimmering silver. All that exquisite yet everyday magic which I am so happy to be marvel now I am can call South Australia home once more.

To truly tell the stories of this country, Australian history must grow beyond its western traditions. While historians once confined themselves to written archives and objective analysis, many Australians now recognise that this Country and its precious Elders are living repositories of ancient knowledges about this land and who we have been – as well as all that we might yet become. For some time now, a growing appreciation for First Nations cultures has been inspiring new approaches to our shared past. Approaches which are often more intimate, and embodied, subjective, and speculative than those once allowed by the strict edicts of conventional history. But that is what so many of us sense is now necessary if we are to tell our stories our way.

Likewise, although historians once rarely questioned the act of using linear time to chart ‘progress’, ‘evolution’ and ‘change over time’, we have begun to wrestle with new, or rather, much more ancient notions of Deep Time, which celebrated artistic director and Quandamooka man, Wesley Enoch, recently referred to as the All Time. Wes invites us to consider how these more interconnected and circuitous notions of time have shaped this continent long before Europeans began imposing the tick-tock regulation of Greenwich Mean Time upon this continent. For Wes, the All Time is like a double helix – with past, present and future constantly twisting and turning in an eternal circle of life. The past is never really past, says Wes. Nor is it ever done. It is always NOW. Always alive.

‘Doing History’ at this moment in Australia presents us with an incredible opportunity to review all our assumptions about how we ‘practice the past’ as we collaborate in the development of new methods which are grounded in the unique particularities of the land and its People. Once we have truly embraced Indigenous Knowledges as the starting point for our stories, we will be better able to celebrate the depth and diversity of our many migrant communities who now call South Australia home. In so doing, we can then also revisit some of our assumptions about the British diaspora, which are too-often conflated into one cartoon version of a toffy-toned Englishman but have also always included the poor and marginalized who helped to make South Australia what it is today, be they the nineteenth-century Irish feminist, Mary Lee, the Welsh stonemason who became a Premier, Tom Price and working-class Scotsman, Jimmy Barnes.

What would happen, I wonder, if South Australia, this land of so many firsts, became the first in Australia to seriously engage with Indigenous Knowledges and these alternative understandings historical time, space and sources? Perhaps this is one way we could partner with First Nations communities, here and internationally, to make the unique stories of South Australia relevant across

the world, for the world? Yes - such provocations are radical, even mystical – but I suspect that is what we need after the last three years, when we have been confronted with environmental and economic precariousness, social unease and statue wars as well as a pandemic that has left so many of us hungry for deeper connection and meaning. At the very least, these provocations invite us to reflect upon not only who we are, but how we tell our stories about ourselves. My hope is that these ideas also foster richer everyday relations between those whose ancestors have been walking these lands for millennia, those whose families have called South Australia home for generations, and those who arrived more recently, be that on boats, on planes - even trains and automobiles.

As my husband and I only returned to South Australia in our old battered white ute five days before I commenced as your History Advocate, we too can be counted among these most recent arrivals. During our week-long road trip from Sydney, we drove over the Blue Mountains, then through country towns such as Nyngan, Cobar, Wilcannia and Broken Hill, often only keeping a few kilometers ahead of floods which are now being described as the very worst in several generations. All around us roads and bridges were being closed, and there were long stretches where we could only drive 40 kilometres per hour because the bitumen had been torn away by raging waters. And yet, within minutes of crossing the border into South Australia, we knew we were home, for there on the horizon, was a rainbow, shimmering with the promise of hope.

Ah, South Australia! How I love your springtime Jacarandas, your wide blue skies, your thick-trunked white gums, your bounteous markets spilling with succulent olives and stinking cheese.

South Australia, land of reform and so many firsts: first telegraph to London; first female vote; first woman to graduate from university; first trans-planet flight; first astronaut; first to abolish sexual and racial discrimination, first to decriminalise homosexuality – and - first to legalise nude swimming! You were also the first state in Australia to nail your colours to the mast when it comes to your own history for you introduced the first heritage conservation laws in the nation and were also the first state gallery museum to display First Nation paintings as contemporary works of art. According to the fossils of the Flinders Ranges, what we now call South Australia may even be where life itself first began some 600 million years ago. But let's not forget, South Australia is also the land of the Vili's pie, Fruchocs, the Big Lobster, Big Scotsman, Big Santa – and yes, that Giant Galah!

Whether we are professional practitioners, self-confessed dabblers or dilettantes – WE – all 1.8 million South Australians – are the shared keepers and custodians of ALL that we are, all that has gone before us and all we are yet to become. Together, we are responsible for our stunning yet fragile environment, our official records and private papers, our precious but often contested objects, our individual and collective memories. Together, we shall discover, care for, and create yet more history, and together we must captivate younger generations in ways that ensure they so cherish their inheritance they are eager to pass it on. Generation to generation.

For that to happen we must work together well - and remember that history is a powerful tool that can hurt as well as heal; it can be wielded by petty minds as well as generous hearts. Fortunately, history has many in-built checks and balances which cultivate careful, conscious thinking. History teaches us to seek out all sides of the story, to consider alternative perspectives and suspend judgement until we have weighed all the evidence thoughtfully and thoroughly. Despite the diminished status of history in our schools and universities, we would be foolish to forget that history not only helps us make sense of the past, but also equips us with skills to negotiate the present – and imagine the create a better future.

For me, the most memorable and moving history also inspires wonder, stimulates the imagination, and encourages empathy. To serve such high purposes, however, history must be regularly troubled and tested. We must continue to question our assumptions and challenge our authority. Even the definition of what history is and who is considered an historian benefits from constant revision and renewal. After all, if history is to work for us, it must meet us in our moment. As Wes says, the past is always alive. Always for the now. Our Now.

Fortunately, history is also a broad church that has the capacity to accommodate all who share a passion for the past. It can and does stimulate and sustain a proliferation of occupations and preoccupations, experimentations and innovations. During my six years in Sydney, I have learned that I must be my own historian. Keen to address the injustices of a partial and porous historical record, which typically neglects those who lacked the education, economics or influence to leave more than a few archival fragments, I have developed methods that draw deeply upon context as I inform my imagination and re-present those who might otherwise remain silenced and shadowy in the record. Much of the work I produce is, to quote historian, Anna Haebich, therefore 'factually informed but creatively conceived'.

As your History Advocate, however, I pledge to let a thousand flowers flourish - to foster all forms of expertise, exploration and history making – be that family history, local history, academic or public history, biography — even historical fiction. Likewise, whether you are an archivist, an administrator, a school kid or a curator, one of the precious people who volunteer within our history institutions – or even running the entire state - I am here to advocate with you - and for you.

When reflecting upon our role in society, historians often quote the well-known phrase attributed to Sir Isaac Newton about 'standing on the shoulders of giants'. This analogy serves to acknowledge the contributions of those who have come before us, dedicating their time, sometimes their entire lives, to tracking down documents, finding forgotten facts and sniffing out secrets, before undertaking the painstaking practice of blending analysis and argument into narrative and making meaning in ways that brings the past to life and give it a new future.

Much as I love the thrill of a new discovery – and I really do – I believe historians make their most important contributions to the world via the delicate and difficult process of translating airy ideas, inanimate archives and ordinary objects into living stories which have the power to transform hearts - as well as minds. Such 'meaning-making' is how historians shed light upon who we have been and also illuminate the path forward. This weighty work requires rigor and self-reflection because it involves not only courting complexity and wrestling with contested topics but also contextualising unpalatable parts of our past so we are able to acknowledge and accept all that we are; warts and all. To realise such responsibilities and make meaning that is rich and resonant with our moment, we must ensure that historians have the time and space such work demands and deserves.

Although we tend to look for such history in books, documentaries, museum exhibitions, classrooms and lecture theatres, I also want to acknowledge the many other forms of historical meaning-making that are equally important and illuminating, which are constantly taking place around kitchen tables and campfires, in community halls, on country and suburban streets, even between neighbours as they lean on their fences to have a bit of a yarn about people and places they remember and love. Likewise, archaeologists and heritage consultants, such as my husband, who often get drenched or sunburnt while scouring the countryside for the stories they miraculously are able to read in the lie

of the land, the sweep of a river and the stratigraphy of soil. All these distinct and diverse explorations and expressions of history remind us that research and evidence, memory and nostalgia are crucial to the continuum of human endeavor because story is deep within our DNA.

One of the first things I will do, as your Advocate, is an audit of these many proliferations. In addition to surveying South Australia's vast collections, I want to better appreciate our history networks and the extraordinary work which has already been produced by my colleagues, whose passion for the past is equal only to their expertise and commitment to the public. As such work has involved collaborations with communities and scholars all over the state, I am eager, no, ridiculously excited, to learn more about these achievements so I can draw inspiration from these as we collaborate on new projects.

Before concluding, I want to acknowledge some of the many people who have shaped my understanding of South Australia. In addition to historians Alan Mayne, Wilf Prest, Margaret Allan, Mandy Paul, Amanda Nettelbeck and Rob Foster, there have been many First Nations people who have taught me about their culture and Country. While, my husband, Bunjalung man, Brian Marshall, has taken me on road trips about the State and in the process shared many of the stories he has been told, I must also acknowledge those First Nation people whose Country was remapped and renamed as South Australia in the aftermath of European settlement. These include Kurna elder, Uncle Lewis Yarlupurka O'Brien, two Ngarrindjeri men, the late Sydney Sparrow and Tom Trevorrow, as well as Tom's weaving artist wife, Ellen Trevorrow, whom I met while working at UniSA, along with Nukunu man Dr Jared Thomas. More recently, the wise and wonderful Ngadjuri elder Parry Agius has shared many stories and insights about another part of South Australia.

Again, I would like to thank the South Australian Government, who enabled the creation of this role – the Chair of The History Trust's dedicated Board of Trustees, Elizabeth Ho OAM - who together with our superb CEO, Greg Mackie OAM, had the temerity and tenacity to reimagine and then restore this role.

The boots I am about to put on are rather big - but that is because they have been worn by giants, by whom I mean our previous State Historians Dr John Tregenza, Dr Susan Marsden AM, and Dr Robert Nicol. Each of these giants contributed their expertise and energy to the History Trust during its first twenty years. To Susan Marsden, who has remained actively supportive of the History Trust as a History Guardian – thank you. South Australia is richer and wiser for your contribution, and I hope to occasionally seek you out for advice, inspiration - and courage!

Finally, I offer my heartfelt thanks to you, the 1.8 million keepers and custodians of our precious past. Thank you for inviting me to be a steward to your stories, our stories. I pledge solemnly and joyously to embrace the potent possibilities evoked by the word - 'Advocate' to intercede on your behalf, to pursue justice where that is necessary, to protect and champion our past, AND in the process, to do my very best to give voice to all that we are - for you – and with you.

Thank you