
'like walking a tightrope': Shirley Fitzgerald, Public Historian

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Sydney has been most fortunate in having a historian of the calibre and fortitude of Dr Shirley Fitzgerald who has written about and fought for its history for over four decades. Shirley's academic credentials and oeuvre are impeccable. She gained a PhD from Macquarie University in 1976 under the supervision of the late Max Kelly who was also a leading writer and proponent of Sydney's history. Shirley, as well as Max, attests to the significant but generally unacknowledged role that Macquarie University played in the emergence of Public History in Australia. Her academic career included appointments at Macquarie University (1972-1976), the University of New England (UNE) (1976-1986) – though a certain culture in universities at the time which still lingers on worked against her obtaining a tenured position at UNE – and, in the mid 1990s, as a Lecturer in the University of Sydney's history department. Here she

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inaugurated a Master of Letters in Public History in 1993. Since 2008, Shirley has been an Adjunct Professor in the Australian Centre for Public History at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Australian historiography has also benefited greatly from Shirley's innovative work on urban history. *Rising Damp: Sydney 1870-1890*, published by Melbourne University Press in 1987, is a remarkable recreation of Sydney's urban environment which looked in particular into working life and occupational mobility in the late nineteenth century. It challenged conventional interpretations of colonial living conditions and quickly became a model for progressive urban historians. Based on her PhD thesis, *Rising Damp* was a powerful corrective to a school of thought in urban history, largely advanced by male economic historians such as N. G. Butlin and W. A. Sinclair and demographers, that saw Sydney's – and Australia's – history as, ultimately, a story of wealth and progress. For Shirley, the cycle of boom and bust was certainly real enough. But she essentially argued that a period of so-called economic boom did not equate with general prosperity and wellbeing. Indeed, while not dealing with the Great Strike of 1890 in this book, she linked this industrial clash not simply to a downturn in the economy but to at least two decades of unequal and inequitable development. Thus she could conclude that:

The people who lined the streets of Sydney to cheer the strikers, and watch the mounted police disperse the demonstrations and protect the scab labourers filing down to the docks, knew they lived a long way from utopia... They recognised that class did indeed exist, and was not about to go away, that egalitarian behaviour did not mean the same as equality, and that henceforth they would have to operate on the understanding that this country was no worker's paradise, but just another capitalist society, reproducing the same antagonisms as in the old world.¹

Reading the Author's Note in *Rising Damp* today, it may seem a little quaint that Shirley attempted to placate 'critics who', she wrote, 'will find some of the present amount of [statistical] detail uncalled for', while noting that there was even more of these figures, graphs and tables in her thesis which she had spared her readers. This, however, reflected the political environment in which she was working. The armoury of evidence was required to defend her radical argument from conservative critiques.

Shirley's work in this period was also published in prestigious journals such as *Australian Historical Studies*² and in various edited collections such as Richard Kennedy's *Australian Welfare History: Critical Essays*³ and *Families in Colonial Australia*.⁴ In the latter, she again took on some big guns, for example, over the complex realities of Sydney's fragmented markets for casual employment. Countering R.V. Jackson's contentions about labour shortages and the ease of employment in late nineteenth-century Sydney, she observed that: 'From my own reading of the evidence for Sydney, I find it impossible to believe that unemployment was insignificant'. Shirley also criticised Jackson and others for 'fail[ing] to take seriously the overwhelming evidence for oversupply of female labour in all employment except perhaps in domestic service'.⁵

We should remember that at this point in time, Australian history was changing rapidly. The first major histories about women in Australia had only appeared in the mid 1970s – Ann Summer's *Damned Whores and God's Police* (1975), Beverley Kingston's *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann* (1975) and Miriam Dixon's *The Real Matilda* (1976). Sydney history, too, was in its infancy. The Sydney History Group (SHG) was formed in 1975; three years later Shirley contributed a chapter to the first of seven volumes that the SHG was to publish in association with a variety of presses until it was disbanded in 1995.⁶ Shirley and Garry Wotherspoon were the editors of the SHG's final book which was published in that year and took as its theme minorities in Sydney.⁷

In the preface to *Minorities: Cultural Diversity in Sydney*, Shirley and Garry observed that the SHG had been established in response to the rise of 'the "new" field of urban history'. Its mandate was to build a body of academic literature on Sydney and to stimulate an interest in talking, researching and writing about the city's past and about the past in the present. The SHG was, in our view, as much an activist as an academic group. It encouraged its members to participate in protests to save built heritage such as Juniper Hall in Paddington and the art deco Commonwealth Bank building in Martin Place. And it facilitated interactions between academics, students, independent scholars and anyone who was interested in the city's history and heritage. Indeed, it provided a focus for young and independent historians and was a precursor of sorts to the Professional Historians Association of NSW which was established in 1985. While marking the demise of the SHG, the editors of *Minorities* noted its passing as a sign of the Group's final success. 'The place of urban history', they wrote:

is now secure, and it is difficult for students and public alike to imagine that there was a time, merely a few decades ago, when our history was believed to revolve almost exclusively around non-urban issues. The great drama and significance of our cities will continue to engage historians, and their work will continue to inform the growing number of Sydney's citizens who value the history of this place.⁸

Shirley played an important role in these developments.

In 1987, Shirley's stature in Sydney history led to her appointment, after a highly competitive process, to the much-coveted position of Sesquicentenary Historian with the Sydney City Council. While she was to maintain close relations with, and have future appointments in academia, this marked her rise as a public historian. At this time, the term Public History was not in use in Australia. It is claimed that the American Historian Robert Kelley of the University of California, Santa Barbara, coined the term in 1975, though it can be traced back to at least 1794 when Christian apologist, utilitarian and philosopher William Paley wrote that 'public history [is] but [the] register of the successes and disappointments, the vices, the follies, and the quarrels, of those who engage in contentions [for] power'.⁹ 'Public history', Kelley wrote in the first issue of *The Public Historian* – the academic-styled journal of the National Council on Public History – referred 'to the employment of historians and historical method outside of academia'.¹⁰ The name, however, was not universally adopted. Some university departments preferred the label 'applied history',¹¹ bestowing upon the fledgling field a blue-collar status which it subsequently endeavoured to shrug off. Applied history, which technically involved harnessing history to problems in public policy, was often used interchangeably with 'public history'. But many in the American, as well the Australian academy, had another preference which was to largely ignore what was to become at one level a sub-discipline of academic history.

Kelley's simple, pragmatic definition was adopted and refined by the 'public history movement', as professional practitioners outside the academy in the United States broadly termed themselves. Ultimately, many in the movement conceded, as witnessed in the editorial policy of *The Public Historian*, that there was a 'considerable diversity of approaches to the definition and practice of public history'.¹² In Australia, the term Applied History took hold around the time of the Australian Bicentenary. Postgraduate Applied History masters programs were first established in 1988 at the University of Technology, Sydney

and at Monash University. By the early 1990s, they had adopted the term Public History.

If Public History can be broadly defined 'as a diverse set of practices that communicate and engage with historical meanings in public arenas',¹³ then Shirley practised public history at the Sydney City Council with enormous effect. Rather, as was the Council's initial intention, than produce one volume on the City's history – which even with a five-year lead-time would have been a daunting task – Shirley convinced it to undertake four case studies of the City's various villages: firstly Chippendale, then the Surry Hills and Millers Point's books – both written with Chris Keating – and finally Pyrmont and Ultimo which she co-authored with Hilary Golder.¹⁴ These are both evocative and provocative localised urban histories which not only provide rich detail of urban life and culture. They are concerned with contemporary social justice and the future of Sydney. 'To write about the history of the Pyrmont Peninsula', Shirley and her co-author Hilary Golder wrote in the introduction to their book *Pyrmont and Ultimo*, 'is to write in anger':

At least that is how it seems to us. As historians, we were trained to do otherwise. Tell the story dispassionately, they said. Let the facts speak for themselves. Let the reader be the judge. Don't intrude yourself unduly. And if you can't help proselytising, at least exhibit the skills of doing it subtly.

But there is nothing subtle about the history of Pyrmont and Ultimo, and nothing subtle about the relationship between this piece of Sydney and every citizen of Sydney. It is possible to live in Sydney and never visit the peninsula, but historically, it has not been possible to live in Sydney – or indeed many other places in Australia – without the labours of the people who lived and worked in Pyrmont and Ultimo.¹⁵

It is a testament to the quality and popularity of these books that the City of Sydney Council recently updated and reissued these groundbreaking localised urban histories of the inner city.¹⁶

While a separate work on the history of planning in Sydney was commissioned as part of the Sesquicentennial History Program,¹⁷ Shirley's work interrogated the failure of town planning in the City, binary tensions between capital and labour, property and people, public interests and profit and the relationship between municipal authority and its far more powerful political masters in Macquarie Street. At the

same time, she lovingly portrayed Sydneysiders, various communities – including Sydney’s Chinese population¹⁸ – and the built and natural environments of her adopted city.

*Sydney 1842-1992*¹⁹ – in her own words, the ‘hardest piece of work that I have ever done’ – is driven by the same themes and preoccupations. It is a book that in the final analysis seeks to foster participation, via historical awareness, in the hope of making Sydney a better place in which to live, work and play. Importantly, given the public historian’s concern with audience and accessibility, it is a book that takes seriously the need to clearly communicate the past, and its importance to decision-making and value systems, in the present. Shirley was at best uncertain as to how the work would ‘be accepted... in the world of academia’. But, again in her own words, ‘that wasn’t the world I was writing for.’²⁰ In a review of the work in the Professional Historians’ Association’s newsletter, *Phanfare*, Catherine Snowden wrote that:

I’m surprised that one reviewer has written that this is not a biography. This may be so, yet it has much in common with the adventurous structures, elaborate intertwining of events and artefacts and entrancing ironies that make the rich tapestries of the newer biographies written by Hilary Spurling, Drusilla Modjeska, Peter Ackroyd (sometimes) and Michael Holroyd. This may not be the *Sydney* you like to think of in the springtime; in many ways it’s Heartbreak House, but it performs the difficult feat of being impressive in its scholarship, humorous, a brilliant tapestry and a pleasure to read.²¹

The Sesquicentenary History Program was arguably the most ambitious and successful commissioned history project undertaken in the late 1980s and 1990s. It eventually produced seven books and three works of reference, all under Shirley’s supervision. And it symbolised the boom in Australian commissioned history in the latter part of the twentieth century which mirrored the enormous rise in history’s popularity at this time and its gradual democratisation. In a random sample undertaken by Laila Ellmos in the mid 1990s for the entry on commissioned history in *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, 147 books were produced between 1945 and 1996. From the early to mid 1980s, one or two were published each year; 26, not surprisingly, were produced in 1988; and to the mid 1990s the number averaged ten per year, with a record 20

histories being published in 1996. More books – 74 to be exact – were published between 1990-96 than in the preceding 40 years. Some of these histories, notably those in the City’s history program, ‘breathed new life into some older academic specialisms, such as urban history’,²² which had been absorbed into the new social history by the mid 1980s.²³

Looking back over her time as the Sesquicentenary Historian, Shirley recounted in an interview with Kate Evans for the journal *Public History Review* that the challenge of this position had been particularly attractive, not simply because it involved researching and writing about the City of Sydney: she ‘knew it would be a politically interesting job’.²⁴ But it was even more than this. It entailed a quantum shift in her practice as a historian. Shirley recalled that:

I don’t think that I appreciated [that] until I’d been doing it for a couple of years, and started to analyse how my own approach to history writing and researching... was changing as a result of doing the job... my ideas... developed, from complete naivety to having some sort of an understanding of the complexity of working as a historian in the community... when you work as a historian in academia... you are essentially an academic, and your role is to research and teach. When you move out into the community you become a great many more things to a great many more people.²⁵

Questions as to audiences beyond the academy became central to her work. This was:

another thing that as a historian – as an academic historian – I had never thought consciously about. [Though] I’m not saying that no academic historians do.²⁶

Multiple audiences and the commissioning process, however, generated a competing range of pressures and expectations. Shirley compared it to ‘walking a tightrope all the time’.²⁷ Council priorities, state machinations, community expectations, the needs of individuals and pressures for continual redevelopment can create ‘a minefield for a historian to go into’:

There’s an expectation on the part of all of those people that the history you write will have some relevance to the problem that they see. They talk about the past and they

talk about the needs of the community to be taken into account now and in the future...²⁸

For Shirley, there is only one answer to this dilemma. In the final analysis, 'writing history is a political act' so 'as a professional historian you write the best history that you can from the political perspective that has the most integrity for you'.²⁹

By the early 1990s, Shirley had become one of the most prominent public historians in Australia. While researching, writing and tightrope walking at the Council, she also directed her energies into the Professional Historians' Association of NSW Inc (PHANSW) which she joined soon after its establishment. Living in Armidale, at this time, it was a little difficult to commit to regular meeting attendance. But she became Convenor of the Fees, Copyright, Contracts and Ethics Committee in 1987 and a member of the PHA's Management Committee in 1989. In 1992 she was elected President of the association. This was the first time that the presidency had been contested. The PHA's newsletter reported that on taking the chair after the election, the incoming President:

foreshadowed changes in the direction of the PHA and the conduct of its Management Committee meetings. Expressing the belief that the Association had reached a stage where its members could be justifiably proud of their historical publications and work, she stated that the time had come to shake off our feelings of being the 'poor relations' of academic historians and become active in setting directions for the profession. She forecast a more assertive drive to educate the community on the benefits of history, particularly groups not usually the subject of commissioned histories.³⁰

After the Sesquicentenary History Program Shirley took up an appointment at the University of Sydney with a specific brief to establish a postgraduate public history program. Her students included Dr Margaret Park, Megan Martin, Rachael Graham and James Maloney. It gave Shirley particular satisfaction to encourage mature-age students in their pursuit of public history.

From 1994-96 Shirley also became a consultant historian to the Sydney City Council. At that time, unlike the United States, very few government departments and agencies employed historians or history officers. Shirley noted, 'there is, as yet, little recognition of the role

historians... can play within administrative and policy making areas.³¹ But the advantages of having a historian around soon became obvious to Sydney City Council. And in 1997, having ramped up the Council's historical activities, she became the official City Historian, a first in Australia.

During this consulting period, the council commissioned Shirley to write a history of Sydney's Chinese community. *Red Tape Gold Scissors: the story of Sydney's Chinese* was published in English in 1997, and translated into Mandarin the following year. This history opened up new audiences and understandings of this significant migrant community at the heart of Sydney. Shirley inadvertently became a cultural ambassador for Sydney amongst the Chinese community, both here and overseas.

Her appointment as the official City Historian gave Shirley the platform to develop the scope of public history and community engagement at the Council. She provided input into many of the decision-making processes of Council. The namings of new street and parks were shaped by her advice, as were name change proposals. Interpretive signage in buildings and parks have benefited from her critical gaze, reminding professionals such as architects, archaeologists and planners that a historian brings a contextual perspective to the practice of interpretation. The creative contribution of historical meaning to cultural production is particularly demonstrated in the commissioned artworks of the Sydney Sculpture Walk (2000-1), which were informed by site histories developed by Shirley.³² Its curatorial approach and incorporation of historical meanings set an Australian benchmark in the commissioning of new civic art and laid the foundation for the City's future public art program, which now regularly draws historical meanings and responses into the artwork.

The Strip on the Strip (2005) took interpretive signage to a new level, by inscribing along Darlinghurst Road the social history of the place. Business, literary, artistic and community connections were highlighted using a series of 100 plaques laid in a broken strip along the pavement. The concept of the strip signified a time line, a continuity of use, a never-ending story. It was both public art and informative. It incorporated poetry, quotations and whimsy. This was a playful response to Sydney's late night entertainment precinct, but its meanings were serious, and the plaque concerning Abe Saffron had to wait until his death to be laid:

ABE SAFFRON

Publican and nightclub manager from 1946,
Convictions and court appearances from 1938.
Friends in high places.

A booklet tells the stories that inspired the bronze street plaques supplements the Strip on the Strip.³³

Part of the City Historian's role was to contribute to the awareness and understanding in the wider community of the City of Sydney as a significant historical place through advice and presentations. Shirley advocated making serious history accessible to the public, and to that end contributed research, ideas and expert appearances to film, radio and television. In the History Council of NSW's Fifth Annual History Lecture, *History? You must be joking*, Shirley chided practising historians, both in the academy and the public domain, to remember the importance of the audience: 'Always the eye must be on the audience, because no matter how finely honed the argument, no matter how impressive the scholarship, if it is not heard, or cannot be heard because the language is foreign, then the whole point of knowing is lost.'³⁴

Shirley continued her quest for a general audience. Throughout her time as City Historian she was in constant demand for insightful comments and entertaining stories about Sydney's past. Her voice became recognisable across the airwaves. She had regular slots on radio including ABC 702 and 2UE, providing history vignettes and historical perspectives on current affairs.

As the History Program developed at the Council, Shirley moved away from straight commissioning of history books to oversee more innovative projects that strove to reach a wider audience. In 1997 she worked with Imax to produce a film and publication about Sydney's history. *Sydney: A Story of a City*, directed by Bruce Beresford and Geoff Burton, and starring Paul Mercurio and Lucy Bell, was 'A Modern Love Story... with a Past'. The Rocks was the evocative setting for romance to blossom over historical records and archaeological artefacts. The wide-shot Imax format gave opportunities for sweeping panoramic shots and the recreation of the Garden Palace fire, but the complexities of Sydney's history were toned down by the directors. It is safe to say that the lavishly illustrated book of the same name, penned by Shirley, proved more popular than the Imax film.³⁵

In the lead-up to the Sydney Olympics Shirley oversaw the research and publication of Barani, the City's online introduction to Sydney's Indigenous history. This website addressed a large gap in the historiography of Sydney, presented this history from an Aboriginal perspective and was widely utilised by international journalists and visitors during 2000. The website was expanded in 2001 to incorporate multimedia images, maps and audio,³⁶ and led the way in the

presentation of Indigenous history. It received the NSW Premier's History Award in 2002 for multimedia.

With her leadership and vision Shirley built up the History Program at the City of Sydney to be a dynamic group of historians that contributes to historical scholarship and the cultural life of the City. The foundation of the City Council's oral history collection and its delivery online is another legacy that will allow many diverse aspects of the city's history to be told to a world-wide audience.

Politics were never far from the surface during her time at the City of Sydney. The pull between the local community and the professional historian requires Shirley to continue to walk a tightrope. Editorial independence of the public historian was another line carefully trod. Throughout her time at the City of Sydney Council, Shirley maintained the editorial integrity of the History Program, ensuring the program's authority and respect within the history community and across disciplines. But she continued to ask the hard questions, such as: 'who gets to propose historical meaning'? She challenged the heritage industry to stop serving up 'pseudo-historical sludge' and to employ experienced historians to produce nuanced, engaging histories that could inspire meaningful interpretation.³⁷

Shirley has been an outstanding figurehead for the practice of history. She was integral to the establishment of the History Council of NSW in May 1995 and served as its president between 1996-99. The History Council was a new venture in Australia – a peak body bringing together historians and institutions where history is practiced, from the academy, to museums and archives, to government, professional historians and local historical societies. It is an organisation that allows the history community to unite together to advocate for the role of history in our society and to encourage excellence in the practice of history.

Shirley's prominent position within the field of Public History led to a number of key appointments on government panels and boards. She was a Member of the History Advisory Panel of the Heritage Council of NSW 1994-1997, Trustee of Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales 1996-1998, on the History and Civics Committee, NSW Centenary of Federation 1999-2002 and Chair of the State Records Authority of New South Wales 2001-6. In all of these capacities she advocated for access and audiences.

Shirley's final act as City Historian was to sew the seeds for an urban and public history project on a grand scale: The Dictionary of Sydney.³⁸ This ambitious project aimed to create an encyclopaedic online historical resource that captured the connections, communities, sights

and sounds of Sydney using the latest digital tools and visualisation techniques. Shirley galvanised support around her from 2004. A successful ARC linkage grant with the University of Sydney, the University of Technology, Sydney, the City of Sydney Council and State Records NSW brought in nearly \$1million to develop the project. In an attempt to give the project life beyond a research project, a Trust was formally established in 2006.

The Dictionary of Sydney engages with and tells stories about Sydney's diverse communities and celebrates the unique characters of Sydneysiders and their suburbs. What makes the Dictionary unique is the way it visualises the societal networks that underpin Sydney's communities and histories. Its accessibility to writers and readers renders this a remarkably inclusive project. The Dictionary is conceived as an ongoing collaborative partnership between historians, community groups and cultural institutions. In this regard the Dictionary exemplifies Shirley's commitment to Public History.

Shirley Fitzgerald's contributions to the practice of Public History in this state have been enormous. The City of Sydney Council remains committed to its History Program, employing three full-time historians. North Sydney Council continues to support a North Sydney Historian. And Marrickville Council has an active history agenda. Yet the role of Public History and its valuable contribution to public administration, governance and infrastructure, as well as to the arts and heritage industries, still remains sidelined. History continues to be underfunded in comparison to other art forms and the teaching of public history at an undergraduate and graduate level remains marginal. It is a timely reminder that advocacy for history's value, and the History Council of NSW's role in supporting such advocacy, is needed as much today as it was when Shirley helped form the History Council seventeen years ago.

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