

She Shapes History at the National Library of Australia: Talk 1 Reading List

Rose Quong's diary

In January 1924, a 44-year-old Melbourne-born public servant named Rose Quong got on a ship and sailed to England. She was going to become an actress. She'd already made a name for herself in Melbourne, on the amateur stage, but amateur was as far as it could go at home. So she did what many Aussies do and she left. She would go on to perform with the likes of Dame Ellen Terry and a young Laurence Olivier.

Can you picture anything more glamorous than an actress in the 1920s? The image you're imagining probably didn't look like Rose. She was Chinese-Australian, and back in Melbourne, where she'd spent decades winning elocution prizes and reciting Shakespeare, hardly anyone seemed to remark on it. Critics reviewed her work, not where her family came from. But the moment she stepped onto a London stage, that changed completely. Suddenly she wasn't an actress who happened to be Chinese, rather she was "the Chinese actress." This wasn't the career she'd set out for; she'd trained for Shakespeare, not for representing an entire culture every time she opened her mouth. But it was the only door that opened, so her friends nudged her towards reciting Chinese poetry instead, and she built a whole career out of it.

I find it really interesting that in Melbourne, Rose got to be just an actress. Audiences there were happy to claim a Chinese-Australian success, as long as the Chinese part stayed unspoken. The White Australia Policy was meant to keep people like Rose out. But because she was already here, it couldn't keep her out. Instead, it let her in, on the condition that nobody said out loud the reason she might not have belonged in the first place. Nobody celebrated her as Chinese-

Australian, because nobody was acknowledging it at all, and that's part of why she isn't remembered here the way she should be. Then she stepped onto a London stage, that silence broke, and she was never just an actress again. From then on, she was always the Chinese actress first.

The National Library recently digitised Rose's papers, including the original diary she documented her journey in. They had come to the Library by way of her housemate. Rose was someone who never married, and as someone who has had such deep friendships with housemates, I know how intimate that relationship can be. It's a real reminder that those close to us and remembering us aren't always our family or partners.

Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue's speech

When Lowitja O'Donoghue died in 2024, she was given a state funeral where the Prime Minister called her one of the most remarkable leaders this country has ever known.

She was born in 1932, taken from her family at the age of two, renamed, and raised in a mission. She wouldn't see her mother again for more than thirty years. When she applied to train as a nurse at the Royal Adelaide Hospital, she was rejected for being Aboriginal. She took her case all the way to the Premier, and in 1954 she was accepted, and opened the door for many Aboriginal nurses to follow. After this, she only got louder and stronger in her fight for First Nations rights. She chaired national bodies, and became the first Aboriginal person to address the United Nations, and was named Australian of the Year in 1984. She campaigned for the 1967 referendum, helped negotiate native title, and helped shape the words Kevin Rudd would speak in the 2008 National Apology.

The National Library holds her speeches, this being one of them. Delivered in New York in December 1992, at the International Launch of the Year of the World's Indigenous People, it's generous, visionary, and completely unambiguous about what she was asking for. She was asking for partnership, not retaliation; for a future built honestly on the past. That same day, the Prime Minister, Paul Keating, delivered the Redfern speech at the national launch of the International Year of the World's Indigenous People. It was a landmark moment and it has lived in our national consciousness ever since. But Lowitja spoke too. In New York. On the world stage. And her words—the words of someone who had actually lived what the Prime Minister was describing—are an equally important part of that history.

Whose voices do we hold onto? Whose stories make it into our national memory, and whose get quietly set aside? What does it mean that we remember the ally's speech more readily than the voice of the woman who had spent her entire life fighting for exactly what both of them were asking for?

Photograph of Eirene Mort and Nora Kate Weston

When we talk about what the archive preserves, we tend to think about what it tells us, but I sometimes think the more interesting thing is what it doesn't.

This photograph is of two women: Eirene Mort, a professionally trained artist and designer who studied in London and brought the Arts and Crafts movement back to Australia, and Nora Kate "Chips" Weston, a skilled metalworker, woodcarver and carpenter. They met as students in London around 1902, and sailed home to Sydney together in 1906, where they set up a shared studio. From there, they built a life together that would last sixty years. For part of that time, they lived at a house they named Weld, at Vaucluse, where they made their art and took in students.

Their families always called it companionship. It's only in recent years that historians, particularly Sylvia Martin, have started reading it differently: as a queer partnership hiding in plain sight. This photograph sits right at the centre of that conversation. Why is there a theodolite tripod, repurposed as an easel? A woodworking plane, resting in frame? An axe, just sitting there? I have a feeling they're likely inside jokes. In any case, they're questions we don't have answers to.

Queer men appear in the archive far more readily because they were policed, prosecuted, and recorded. Queer women could live together as companions, as friends, as professional partners, and the world would simply look the other way. Which meant their lives were hidden in plain sight. They weren't necessarily erased, but they also weren't named. Which means we have to look for them in the silences.

The Kookaburra Collection

We all know zines are very trendy right now, but I have a feeling this may be the oldest one you've ever laid eyes on. Between 1904 and 1905, a handful of fairly privileged Sydney teenagers put together a handmade monthly magazine of their own. They called it *The Kookaburra*. In it you'll find short stories, satirical cartoons, poems, social pages, travel and theatre reports, book reviews, and illustrations.

Creative work made by teenage girls almost never survives. It's ephemeral, personal, informal. It gets thrown out and dismissed. The fact that this didn't, and that it's sitting in the National Library, is remarkable. It gives us this incredible insight into how these young women were witnessing and watching the changing world around them. There's a report in *The Kookaburra* on the "first motor car" running from Blackheath to Jenolan Caves, where at one point, they had to harness a horse to the car to help it up the hill. This is a young woman's dispatch from a world changing around her in real time.

We've never been particularly good at taking what teenage girls make seriously. Not then, and certainly not now. We have this long and fairly embarrassing track record of mocking what teenage girls make and care about, until the moment we finally care about it. Fan fiction communities have produced so many published novelists. BookTok, which is overwhelmingly young and female, has played a major part in reversing the publishing industry's declining sales. The language teenage girls coin online enters mainstream use within months. Their cultural influence is enormous. Yet, our acknowledgement of it is, historically, almost nonexistent, if not mocking.

These girls were using creativity to process a world transforming around them, and they were doing it in their own words, in their own voices, on their own terms. The inner lives of teenage girls are worth keeping. And the Kookaburra shows us what happens when we do: we get to watch the world change through the eyes of the people who actually noticed it happening.

May Kwong's christening jacket

May Kwong was born in Australia in 1901, the same year the White Australia Policy came into law. Her father, Kwong Sue Duk, had made the journey from China decades earlier, in 1875, and built a life and a business in Darwin that would eventually stretch across four marriages, two dozen children, and, today, more than 800 descendants scattered around the globe. May was the fourth wife's daughter.

In May 1901, Chinese Australians paraded dragons through the streets of Melbourne to celebrate Federation. The Bo Leong Society had spent £250 (a significant sum!) on a dragon made specially for the occasion. Chinese Australians weren't watching Federation happen from the outside. They were in the streets, celebrating alongside everyone else, invested in what this new nation might become.

Later that same year, one of the first acts passed by that same parliament was the Immigration Restriction Act. It was one of the key policies that formed the White Australia Policy. It was a document that said, in essence: people like you are not who we had in mind when we say "Australian."

This jacket is a tiny and exquisite direct rebuttal to that story. The White Australia Policy was dismantled 53 years ago, but it was in place for 72 years. It didn't just decide who we let into this country—it shaped the story we told about who we were. And objects like this one challenge that story. They prove the people the policy tried to write out were here before it, during it, and after it. I truly believe that finding them, and bringing them to light, is part of how we build a more honest, more multicultural Australia.

Judith Stubbs / Bringing Them Home oral histories

So much of what sits in the archive has been written about First Nations people, not by them.

In 1997, the landmark Bringing Them Home report was tabled in Federal Parliament. It was the first government inquiry to formally document the experiences of Stolen Generations survivors and the ongoing impact of their forced removal in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It was a moment of national reckoning, and one of its first recommendations was this: that these stories needed to be preserved, in people's own voices.

So, in December 1997, the Commonwealth Government announced that the National Library would be funded to develop and manage an oral history project in direct response to that recommendation. Between 1998 and 2002, 340 interviews were recorded—over 600 hours of recordings with people directly affected by the laws and policies which created the Stolen Generations. For many of those people, it was one of the first times they had ever been asked to tell their own story. Not to have it told for them, or about them. But to tell it themselves. This is

Australia's most significant oral history project. It's one that has fundamentally changed the ways Australians understand the history of the Stolen Generations.

To me, this collection represents an act of enormous trust. People entrusting their most painful stories to this institution. And the Library has held that trust seriously. What you hear in these recordings isn't testimony filtered through someone else's pen. It's history, told by the people who lived it.

Aarju Neupane photograph, Harris Park

The National Library doesn't only collect what was, but also what currently is. It makes decisions, right now, about what will matter in a hundred years. About whose stories deserve to be kept. About who counts as part of this forever story of who we are as Australians.

This photograph was taken in November 2024 at a fashion boutique on Wigram Street in Harris Park, Sydney. Harris Park sits just next to Parramatta, and over the past few decades it has become one of the most vibrant South Asian precincts in the country. It's sometimes called Little India. It's a place of sari shops and sweet stores, of spice markets and temples, of families who have built entire lives and communities in western Sydney. It is, without question, a part of contemporary Australian life.

The woman in the photograph is a fashion assistant named Aarju Neupane, one of twenty portraits the Library commissioned across this precinct. What draws me to this one specifically is the layered watching happening within it: an older tradition of dress being handled, tried on, and made new again by someone young enough to still be deciding what to keep and what to leave behind. The Indian diaspora is the fastest-growing community in Australia. It's shaping who we are and how we see ourselves, and it's happening right now, while we're all still watching. A hundred years from now, someone will pull this photograph from the archive and see Aarju

Neupane, in a fashion boutique on Wigram Street, and know without question that she was part of the story too.

Judi Summers

Why do we privilege some forms of memory-keeping over others? We tend to treat the written record as the authoritative one. The document, the letter, the published account. But voices carry things that paper cannot. And in doing so, they democratise who gets to be part of the historical record.

The National Library's Oral History and Folklore collection is the largest in Australia, with more than 57,000 hours of recordings, dating back to the 1950s and growing by over a thousand hours every year. It is one of the most extraordinary resources in the country. And it is, I'd argue, a deeply feminist one, because it is specifically designed to capture the voices that the written record tends to leave out.

Which brings me to Judi Summers. In 2012, a handful of older women in Lismore joined an anti-coal seam gas group. They wanted to take action as the Northern Rivers was being targeted for mining, but grew frustrated at the inaction of their male colleagues and with being asked to make teas and take minutes. So they got out their knitting, pulled up their folding chairs, and started parking themselves by the roadside near the mining company's work sites—watching, and quietly recording, every truck that came and went. No one suspects a group of women knitting, and so they could sit there for hours, in plain sight, and nobody thought to move them on.

One of the original Nannas, Liz Stops, later said the name was chosen deliberately—that "knitting" and "nannas" were words that could conjure a nostalgic image of older women, all trust and love. And then they used that image as a tool. The Knitting Nannas Against Gas grew from a handful of women in the Northern Rivers into an international movement, and Judi Summers is one of the women who's kept it going.

You won't find a story like hers in most written histories. It's too local, too grassroots, too easy to overlook when you're writing about older women in rural New South Wales. Which is exactly why the Library recorded it and ensured it did.

Margaret Tucker

Margaret Tucker was thirteen when she was taken from her family in 1917 and sent to train for domestic servitude. Born in 1904, she spent decades fighting for Aboriginal rights. She co-founded the Australian Aborigines League in 1932, represented her community at the Day of Mourning in 1938, and became, in 1964, the first Aboriginal woman appointed to a Victorian government board. She was one of the most significant figures in twentieth-century Australian political life. And later in life, she wrote it all down. When *If Everyone Cared* was published in 1977, it was one of the first autobiographies ever published by an Aboriginal person.

But the version that made it to print in 1977 wasn't quite the one she wrote. Editors softened it, smoothed it, made it easier for readers who knew nothing about Aboriginal culture to sit with. Her original storytelling voice was changed. Scholars have since identified 830 editorial alterations to the manuscript. Her words were there, but just weren't entirely hers. The National Library holds the original handwritten manuscript. And in 2024, they published it, drawing directly from that manuscript, reinstating what had previously been omitted, so readers could finally experience Margaret's story as she originally wrote it.

This is a book about reclaiming a voice that was always there. And it asks a question I keep returning to throughout this collection: who gets to tell an Aboriginal woman's story? For a long time, the answer wasn't her, even when it was.

Ruby Rich

In January 1939, Ruby Rich wrote to her family from Washington about the American Women's National Conference on the Cause and Cure of War. She'd been asked to speak on opening day, alongside four other speakers. She reports, with characteristic frankness, that she received rather more applause than the others and was told by many she was the best, and that she is "making valuable contacts for work in the future."

For many Australians, the National Library of Australia holds boxes of correspondence, minutes, speeches, broadcasts, newspaper cuttings. It's a whole life. You open them and you're there, with Ruby in 1939, in a room of a thousand women, watching an Australian woman bring the house down.

When Ruby Rich's talent for the piano became obvious, her father shipped her off to Europe to study it properly. It was in London, watching Britain's suffragettes at work, that something in her shifted, and she went from a young pianist with strong opinions to a woman who'd found the cause she'd spend the rest of her life fighting for.

When war broke out, she signed up with a Voluntary Aid Detachment and spent long stretches in Switzerland, playing piano at concerts for allied troops. Then her younger brother was wounded in France in 1917, and she brought him home. He died not long after, and so did his wife, so Ruby raised their young son herself.

Then in Sydney in 1923, she joined the Feminist Club, and over the next five decades she was involved in women's rights, family planning, peace movements, international organisations, and Jewish community leadership (often all at once!). She addressed three thousand people at a peace conference in Berlin. She helped form what became the Family Planning Association of Australia. She represented Australian women at conferences at The Hague, in Istanbul, in Washington.

Which brings me back to that line: “making valuable contacts for work in the future.” On its own, it reads like ordinary conference small talk. A single object in isolation doesn’t always tell you that much on its own. It’s only once you’ve seen the rest of her papers, the rest of her life, that a line like that stops sounding like small talk.

Rose de Freycinet

This watercolour was painted in 1818, aboard a French scientific expedition sailing around the world. It shows a reception in Dili, Timor. And if you look carefully, there is a woman in it. She is dressed, as she later wrote, in “all the finery I had.” Her name was Rose de Freycinet. And officially, she wasn’t there.

Rose’s husband, Louis de Freycinet, commanded the expedition. French naval ships simply didn’t allow women on board. So Rose, whose idea this apparently was, cut her hair, dressed as a man, and slipped aboard the night before the ship sailed. When news of her presence reached the French media soon after departure, it caused sensational reports in the press and indignation in official circles. The expedition sailed on regardless.

She was the first woman to circumnavigate the world and leave a written record of it. The voyage brought her to Australia too, with a month spent in Sydney in 1819. Her diary was not published until 1927. This was nearly a century after she wrote it, and almost a century after her death. The official published account of the expedition, an enormous, multi-volume production that Louis oversaw himself, erased her entirely. But here is where it gets really interesting. The expedition’s artists made two versions of their paintings: private ones that included her, and public ones without her. This watercolour is one of those private versions. Rose, present in the unofficial record, absent from the official one.

There are always two histories. The one that gets written down, published, preserved in the formal record. And the one that survives in diaries, letters, watercolours, tucked away, waiting to be found. Women have so often lived in that second history.

Gail Mabo

Most people don’t think of the National Library as a place that collects art. This is called *Mabo Claim I*, and it was made in 2022 by Gail Mabo. Gail works across disciplines, and she’s the daughter of the man whose name is now shorthand for one of the most consequential legal battles in this country’s history: Eddie Koiki Mabo, whose decade-long fight ended with the doctrine of Terra Nullius overturned in 1992. This decision changed this country profoundly and permanently.

The National Library holds Eddie Mabo’s original hand-drawn maps of Mer. These are the maps that helped prove, in court, that his people had been continuously living on, using, and caring for their land. In 2001, those maps became the first Australian collections inscribed on UNESCO’s Memory of the World register, alongside James Cook’s Endeavour journal.

Mabo Claim I takes the shapes and lines of those hand-drawn maps of Mer and weaves them into the form of a stick chart, the traditional navigational structures of bamboo, shell and twine used across the Pacific and Torres Strait for thousands of years to read ocean currents and find a way between islands. Even the bamboo carries its own history: Gail grew it from the very plants she and her father tended together, years earlier, while he worked as a groundsman at James Cook University.

This work holds simultaneously: a father’s maps, a daughter’s hands, a legal argument, a navigational tradition, a history of custodianship that was never interrupted. The National Library holds the documents that proved that connection, as well as the art that honours it.

Black Convicts

If you have ever spent time researching Australian history, or your own family history, there is a very good chance you have used Trove. It's the National Library's free online discovery platform, connecting you to more than six billion items (newspapers, books, photographs, maps, manuscripts, oral histories), spanning centuries, and sitting in libraries, museums, galleries and archives all over the country. Historians use it every single day. So do genealogists, students, journalists, and anyone who has ever wondered about a great-grandmother they can't quite place. It was the first place, and still the most common way, I interact with the Library.

This newspaper clipping is from the *Hobart Town Gazette*, July 1832. It records the trial of a woman named Maria Murray, described in the article as a "negro woman," charged with stealing a blanket. It is a brief, blunt, bureaucratic account of a single moment in one woman's life. And it exists because someone digitised it. The National Library's work not only preserves things but makes them findable. And when things become findable, historians can write them back into existence. The archive enables the history. The history changes what we know about who we are.