

Shore of Certain Happiness & Dancing Over Dark Waters -

The Chapbook

The Collaborative works by Sue Anderson and
Gwen Harrison



The books acquired by the British Library in March 2014, "*Shore of Certain Happiness*", and the Chapbook "*Dancing Over Dark Waters*" are the third and fifth book series respectively, produced by Gwen Harrison and Sue Anderson.

Work commenced on our first book "*Quaranta Australis*" in 2007 for a group exhibition "From Ocean to Harbour" by Warringah Printstudio that was held at the Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney in 2008. The choice of subject for this show came from a shared interest in the Quarantine Station situated on North Head at the entrance to Sydney Harbour. Our research revealed that the station's history was a microcosm of Australia's history, from the arrival of the early convict ships and emigrant ships up until its closure in 1984.

The impulse to work on our second book, "*Someone Somebody Run*", resulted from our discovery of graffiti scratched into the walls of a building caged in by wire, by asylum seekers who were being held at the station during the 1970's.

During the two years we were making "*Quaranta Australis*" the treatment of asylum seekers in Australia became an increasingly divisive issue. "*Someone Somebody Run*" reflects some of the fears that were generated and exploited by populist politicians and sections of the media.

Throughout the book repeating phrases and fragments of poetry by Matthew Arnold, WB Yeats, Shakespeare and Milton appear urging the response for reason and compassion.

"*Shore of Certain Happiness*" was made for the Grahame Galleries' exhibition, Lessons in History Democracy, which was held in Brisbane 2012.

Ideas for this work flowed out of research from the previous two books where we looked at a wide range of writers including historians, philosophers and social commentators.

The 'history' pages included in each of the five sections of "*Shore of Certain Happiness*" reflect those writers, being a distillation of their ideas, and a clarification of our own, as we seek to define what makes us Australian.

Also included in each section are two stories that illustrate some of the ways in which the most vulnerable and marginalised have been treated in Australia. Desperation, courage and audacity characterise their refusal to be silenced.

The first story (printed in a titian red), outlines how Mazhar Ali, a Hazara asylum seeker from Afghanistan, held in a remote detention camp at Woomera, South Australia in 2002 jumped onto coils of razor wire, a suicidal act in an attempt to raise public awareness about the plight of refugees held in Woomera. This act was captured by the media, made world headlines and also alerted all Australians to the way in which we were treating people who were legitimately seeking asylum.

The second story (printed in grey) involves convict William Derrincourt, also known as Day, who was held in prison on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour during the 1840's.

The highly original, daring but dangerous way of getting his (consistently ignored) appeal for fairness for himself and others held on Cockatoo to a higher authority outside the island prison is interwoven and layered under Mazhar Ali's story.

Each of the five sections starts with a full page multi coloured etching. Chine Colle on each of the etchings have handset letterpress type expressing significant phrases, or some of the language used by the Aboriginals from the earliest times in colonial Australia.

On the first, overlaying an abstract image of George 111 are the poignant words "people of the clouds" revealing the Aboriginal's vulnerability in their description of the first contact ships.

The second and third etchings include Thomas Keneally's phrase "Strangeness hemmed them in..."
.. "And the sky aimed its big blank blue eyes at them"

The Fourth etching

"A few idealists were transported for propagating that monstrous doctrine of 'The Rights of Man'"

The fifth etching uses the words

"Walla Walla Wha" which means "go away" This was called out by Aboriginals when those early ships started to arrive.

The two phrases uttered by the Aboriginals evoke the Secret Instruction given to Captain James Cook to take possession of convenient situations in the country in the name of the King of Britain, to claim it if it is uninhabited, or the native people gave consent.

Any discussion of the notion of democracy in Australia takes its starting point from those instructions.

Peter Lyssiotis, Melbourne based writer and artist, was aware of our work in overlaying early Australian history with contemporary issues involving marginalisation, incarceration, and Australia's shifting attitude to asylum seekers.

We explained our interest in the history of Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour that was used from 1839 as a convict prison.

The prisoners were used to quarry the sandstone rock on the island, building the prison barracks, a military guardhouse and an official residence. In 1850 prisoners also worked on Fitzroy docks and a workshop to service Royal Navy and other ships.

In 1871 the prison became an Industrial School for girls, and a reformatory.

Peter agreed to write the prose poetry for our new work, the 4th book series "*Dancing Over Dark Waters*".

The large book is bound in hand dyed kangaroo leather, containing full page (52cm by 70cm) multi-plate etchings with fully handset letterpress text, takes the form of a double narrative, "one giving humanity to this harsh place, and the other throwing up questions of our treatment of asylum seekers" (Monica Oppen, Imprint, volume 48 2013)

When we began the printing of the major book, Peter contacted us from Melbourne and asked if we could produce a number of small chapbooks. We were using handset type that could be re-configured, as a result an edition of 30 were made, hastily printed because of a deadline to exhibit all of our works in the Manly Art Gallery and Museum, Sydney, in September and October 2012. The chapbook "*Dancing Over Dark Waters*" includes new relief prints produced by Gwen instead of the comparatively labour intensive monumental etchings she prepared for the main book.

We are currently working on our sixth book series. It involves the history of girls held at Cockatoo Island, either in the Industrial School for girls, or the Reformatory.

Due to its appalling condition, the convicts were removed from Cockatoo Island and transferred to Darlinghurst Prison.

The Island was then renamed Biloela, and it became an Industrial School for Girls in 1871. The renaming was one of the very few 'improvements' of the island, very much like a prison, Biloela was highly unsuitable for its new role.

Once again, this early history mirrors current inquiries into disastrous failures in our society by our institutions and those in positions of authority that led to the mistreatment and abuse of children. Generation after generation we hear the cry of the children when it is too late.

It is often hailed that Australia's colonial history was forged in conditions of extreme hardship through great courage, hard work and optimism. And yet the harsh beginnings of our country also engendered dark deeds and facets of our national psyche to prosper. While many murky details of our history have been forgotten or concealed, they can never be expunged and continue to leave their mark on the fabric of our culture today. Echoes of our past brutalities resonate in the choices our nation is making now.