

CANBERRA CONNECTIONS

An address to the OAA ACT by Penelope Thwaites AM, Chairman OAA UK/Europe
Australia Day 2018

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, and a very Happy Australia Day!

I am honoured to be invited to address you and am very much enjoying meeting OAA Members in the ACT region. And on behalf of the UK/Europe Group, may I bring warm greetings - even if they are all currently shivering in the cold!

Canberra has a special place in my heart. I was born in the UK of Australian parents, and following our return to Australia, I spent my school and university days in Melbourne. But by the time my parents had re-located to Canberra, I had started to make my life and musical career in London. So Canberra then became home on my visits and tours back to Australia.

And how clearly Australian it felt to look out from their sitting-room, across Cobby Street, and over to the lovely bush-covered slopes of Mt Ainslie. One of the first things we would do would be to take a walk up to their favourite view. In the 70s and 80s, you could still see the expanse of Lake Burley Griffin, framed by the gum trees on the slopes... and beyond that, the vivid, sometimes snow-capped mountains.

The diamond clear air of Canberra was a stimulating contrast to England's softer outlook. My parents' delight in the flora and fauna meant close observation of trees and wildflowers as we walked – often under the tolerant gaze of several kangaroos. That wonderful scent of the bush, the endlessly entertaining bird-calls – all seemed to welcome me home.

And more than 40 years later, I still have that feeling. At this time of year it is of course a startling contrast to the Northern winter. A family member has just written to me about how long and dark the winter feels. I have been revelling in the sunlight, as it effortlessly appears most days, lighting up every view. My favourite English bird is the blackbird – a real virtuoso songster. But just as joyful is that sound of the Australian magpies in the early morning. And I was wondering the other day - what on earth our immigrant ancestors must have thought when they first heard a kookaburra? That unbridled cackle – followed up by the gleeful hooting. You can't help smiling.

My parents have died, but some of their things helped to furnish the home-from-home I now have here in Canberra, In that sense, they feel very near. And they feel near in other ways – my three brothers and their families are all based in Canberra, living full and interesting lives. But - if you will forgive me – I would like to pay a short tribute especially to my parents, Michael and Honor Thwaites – for some of the ways they were able to contribute to this city that they loved.

At the end of his life, my father received an AO for his literary achievements (including being the first Australian to receive the Kings Gold medal for poetry). My mother's work in the 1970s was at a time when awards were perhaps less frequent, particularly for women. But I think she would have been astonished to think in those terms at all. What fired her was a passionate love of the natural Australian environment.

Also – as a descendant of pioneers, she was experiencing a growing awareness of how little we knew of the history and culture of the first Australians.

Anyway - her particular venture started with a situation many of us will recognise – unwelcome land development on our doorstep. In the 1970s she got wind of a plan to build a row of town-houses on the opposite side of Cobby Street, obscuring the slopes of their beloved Mt Ainslie. My mother was appalled! She tramped up the hill and sat looking out over their favourite view, fuming.

But at that point, she had an inspiration: *don't just react with fury but find a positive alternative. Why not turn the whole area into a Remembrance Nature Park which everyone can enjoy and which would be a fitting natural space behind our wonderful War Memorial?*

The area already had some problems: cows were grazing on the site at that time and lots of rubbish and non-helpful weeds were spoiling its environment. Mum started to contact neighbours and friends. With the blessing of the local authority, they began to clean up the whole area. The suggested Nature Park idea was submitted, and the name was agreed. My mother also felt that there should be, in the area nearest to the War Memorial, an outdoor meeting place – a kind of miniature amphitheatre – specifically dedicated to the aboriginal troops who had fought and died in the various wars. As you will be aware, the space that was created continues as a special place of meeting to this day – particularly as part of the Anzac Day commemorations.

In 1978 the Remembrance Nature Park was officially gazetted. Walks were created and one of them – just opposite my parents' old home – has a modest sign naming the *Honor Thwaites track*. There is also now a bench in her memory at the favourite viewing spot half way up Mt Ainslie. It is an ideal place just to sit and think and breathe in the bush air.

My father's links with Canberra preceded my parents' move to live here. Although by training and inclination a poet and academic, in 1950 he had been invited to join the newly-formed Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation in Melbourne. This occasionally entailed trips to Canberra. Shortly after he began the job, the fairly routine trips from Melbourne to Canberra became more dramatic with the sudden defection from the Russian Embassy of two Soviet diplomats, Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov.

Apart from the regular de-briefings following this event, Dad surprisingly found himself involved in a literary capacity. The Petrovs wished to tell their individual stories and asked my father to be the ghost writer for their book, *Empire of Fear*. It tells an extraordinary story of life in Stalinist Russia – their rise from peasant backgrounds, through the Communist system to privileged positions, which allowed them to travel abroad as diplomats.

However, their growing disillusion with the Soviet system, led eventually to their defection. When their book was published I read it with fascination and I have never forgotten the impact.

After 20 years with ASIO, my father retired and was offered a job as Assistant Parliamentary Librarian. They moved to Canberra and this turned out to be the happiest period of their lives. They loved the international aspect of the city and its relaxed life-style. Dad became active once again as a poet and writer, producing his memoir *Truth Will Out*, enjoying the literary scene in ACT, publishing books of poems, and organising events.

Many of his poems celebrate Canberra in one way or another. One of them explored the origins of the city's name and here are the last few lines

*The name was here
before white faces came, or boot or hoof
disturbed the Limestone Plains: these valleys, hills
were home and life and spirit-land to a people
fifteen or fifty thousand years. While still
the English tribal tongue was unbegotten
they spoke this name: the timeless gift remains
Nganbra, Kemberry, Canbury, Canberra,
a place of meeting.*

Recently I took another of his Canberra poems and set it to music for soloist and chorus. It's called *Ballad of Old Sox* (think Banjo Paterson)

The story behind the poem is about Gwynne Sutherland, a World War 2 veteran, who eeked out a living from his shanty on the slopes of Mt Ainslie, growing a few vegetables and keeping chickens. Dad would observe Old Sox (as Gwynne was nick-named) as he took his regular bush walks. The local Authority recognised the old man's service to his country and left him alone. Dad was told by one official that if they received a complaint about Old Sox "we lose the file"!

When Sox died, his shack was burnt and all his meagre possessions with it. Here's part of the poem:

*They're burning Old Sox's shack
Just three weeks since he died
The tumbled timber, twisted iron
The line where singlets dried
They'll bulldoze down, let bush grow back
Along Mt Ainslie side.*

*Through forty years he watched
From bush a city growing,
Bridge, highway, suburb, office, tower,
A tide towards him flowing;
He fed his hens and dug his patch
And heard his rooster crowing.*

*Dog, cat and cockatoo,
One sheep, a handy tree,
Time was his only title-deed,
Loneness his property
Authority's humaner eye
Looked past and let him be.*

*Now with the curling wisps
 Something that was is ended.
 He's gone. Let walls and fences fall
 There's nothing to be defended.
 Where's Sox? Working another patch
 Where odds and ends are mended?*

*How does it look from there -
 Look sad, or glad or funny?
 The smoke and ash of forty years
 Through sombre days and sunny,
 Roof, chimney, cupboard, box and bunk
 And the creeper-covered dunny.*

I last heard a performance of my musical setting of this poem sung with relish in the heart of London's West End by a largely British ensemble. Canberra connections indeed!

London has been my home for most of my life - including the last 35 years in the North West of the city – not far from Hampstead Heath . So...can you love two countries? Of course you can! Can you feel, at both ends of the journey, a sense of coming home? In different senses – yes! Since I am not intending to stand for the Australian Parliament, this is not a problem for me. All of us later-comers to Australia (those who arrived in and after 1788) can lay claim to at least two countries – often more. I can see that in terms of parliamentary procedure this may indeed need a clear weighing in favour of the national interest. But most of us do not need to make that particular choice. Fortunately.

I met my late husband Ted Jackson in London in 1981. He was half English and half Scots – a lawyer who adored music but whose main religion was really cricket. Coaching cricket was his passion – and well into his 70s he continued this work with young cricketers for the Middlesex County Cricket Club. His enthusiasm and dedication were infectious. One of the boys who began with Ted was a certain Mike Gatting. The MCC Club recognised his work in cricket coaching by hosting a wonderful reception in the Long Room at Lords after his memorial service in 2010.

When Ted and I met, I had started to build my career as a concert pianist, having played many times at venues like the Wigmore Hall in London, throughout Britain and indeed across the world. It was a big decision to undertake marriage and children. Many – most - women concert pianists decide they cannot do both – and with good reason. But we were delighted to have a son and daughter and indeed, I did continue my career.

Two years into our marriage my workaholic husband took leave to come to Australia with me and our 5-month-old baby son, so that I could accomplish an ABC tour. He impressed my colleagues, Dene Olding and Donald Westlake, by cheerfully turning pages, moving music stands and generally belying what a witty cousin of mine describes as “POM positivity”! It was wonderful to introduce my husband to this city and to many parts of this country, and our children have been back many times.

Musically, the Canberra Connections have continued, I have often performed as a concert pianist in Canberra, but how lovely it was for me that a fine Canberra choir *Igitur Nos* under their director, Matthew Stuckings presented last September a whole concert of my compositions, organised by my singer niece, Veronica Thwaites-Brown. And it was an exciting adventure to be commissioned to premiere my first setting of the Latin Mass with an expanded choir at St John's under their director, Sheila Thompson OAM. The musical connections continue.

To return to London: while pursuing a fairly wide piano repertoire, I have always tried to include Australian repertoire in my concert programmes. Playing, researching and recording the ever-fascinating Melbourne-born Percy Grainger has been a story in itself. But many other Australian composers have featured in my repertoire many of whom I have known personally. To name a few - I think of meeting Margaret Sutherland and later, Peggy Glanville Hicks – Peter Sculthorpe, Malcolm Williamson and others. How valuable to be able to play to them and receive their direct thoughts and advice. And then to take their music to distant lands – and receive the response – Sutherland in the Warsaw Chopin Society, Sculthorpe at the Beijing Conservatory, Glanville Hicks on the BBC and in America, Williamson in Vienna and so on.

In London we twice ran a Performing Australian Music Competition. Young competitors from 20 countries chose their own programmes and we heard music by some 80 Australian composers. It said so much about our country which is rarely heard. It also helped some deserving winners: a brilliant South African marimba player who was able to buy her own instrument; a young Macedonian violinist, who gave a stunning performance of Sculthorpe - so poor, he was sleeping on friends' sofas. Marco could hardly bear to cash in his cheque for £5000!

Alas the professional pursuit of classical music rarely brings in a large salary – quite the reverse. No accountant can understand it. It takes long training, effort, risk, sometimes great disappointment and heartbreak, but huge fulfilment too. When I give a concert, nervous as I may be – I want to share the music which enhances life for me. One of the greatest feelings in a recital is when, in pin-drop silence, you can feel the intent listening of an audience. In that atmosphere, magic things happen. Sometimes I hear back from audience members about how they have been affected. Very touchingly. I'll always remember a comment from my Turkish guide after a performance of a Chopin Polonaise. She was going through a messy divorce. "Listening to that piece" she told me afterwards "I felt I could forgive my husband".

Most of us have felt the power of music – but really great music – the ability to play it and compose it – is hard hard work and it needs an environment of belief and encouragement, of respect for the treasures of the past as well as the present and yes – the finance to support.

It also needs a certain toughness. I am concerned sometimes that we are indiscriminating in our training of the young. We seem to have leapt from horror stories of Dickensian school teachers to a culture where in our bid to encourage, we become sentimental and without real artistic values. It is not kind to a child to shower praise indiscriminately. That child will have to face life and its ruthless competition. He or she will acquire more strength by facing justified – or even unjustified criticism and finding the way forward. Because there IS always a way forward. To deal with failure – even to benefit from failure, is a precious life skill.

But back to Australia Day.

What challenges in Australia strike me the most ?

The Day itself brings into focus the ongoing change in how we look at the history of this land. I notice how much more visible and audible are the aboriginal voices, and how all Australians in our cultural diversity now have many more chances to learn of different approaches to life. When the aboriginal singer Deborah Cheetham AO spoke at Australia House in London recently, she said something I have never heard articulated before: she said “I want *all* Australians to feel a part of our 60,000 year old culture.”

My parents had known leaders of the indigenous community back in the 50s and 60s and we met some of them: the singer Harold Blair, the activist and stateswoman, Margaret Tucker, the dynamic Charles Perkins. We glimpsed something hopeful. Despite the cruelty and blindness of the past, these aboriginal leaders, were prepared to forgive. In that way, they offered us all a challenge - to change in our attitudes, and to move forward. This is clearly a complex and massive scenario and there are no easy answers. But I was proud and encouraged to hear Deborah’s statement.

In taking over as Chair of our Regional Group in 2013, I and the Committee had considered what we might have as a theme for at least some events. As it happened, two of our members had been involved in helping to look after the indigenous Australian scholars at Oxford. We invited one of these students, Sharon Davis to address our Spring Luncheon. It was a really interesting introduction to the use of Aboriginal English as the unifying language for many different tribal backgrounds and Sharon is now in charge of this aspect of education throughout Western Australia.

We also had a memorable evening at Australia House, hearing from two members of the touring group of aboriginal scholars, and then from John Bond OAM about his experience of being involved in national Sorry Day – and the transformation that had produced in many lives. The one to one discussions which followed were appreciated on all sides.

On other topics, we have had major dinners at the Army and Navy Club and at Kings College London. Two previous High Commissioners have invited members to the Residence for dinner and we hope that this tradition can continue. We have been received at Australia House in turn by Deputy High Commissioners Andrew Todd and Matt Anderson, prior to two beautiful OAA Evensong services at the historic Church of St Mary-le-Bow.

Last year, the present DHC Matt Anderson PSM spoke to us about his life and career – including his time as Head of Mission in Kabul. He also gave us some fascinating insight into the current extremely complicated Brexit negotiations. Sitting in on certain meetings, Matt remarked on the special feeling that still exists between Britain and Australia.

Living in Britain today, those Brexit negotiations can only be described as massively messy – and yet – this is often how an artist feels as he or she struggles to shape and create something. There are in fact many exciting and hopeful possibilities. So I am choosing to take the view that - with all the uncertainty – there are any number of chances for Britain to build a great future, both in a new relationship with the countries of Europe and through renewed links with the wider world. This of course includes developing a new relationship between the UK and Australia through mutual trade interests. I hear that Australians are already offering the UK valuable help in trade negotiating skills, since the earlier UK negotiators had been gradually replaced by EU negotiators!

Before closing - I would mention briefly that this last year has also marked an important clarification in our OAA group of how our members' wishes on the privacy of their personal details are properly respected at all times. It is a live issue these days in the wider world of charities. Individuals may be seen – even by apparently reputable bodies – more as “targets” for fund-raising, rather than as human beings, whose individual wishes are of absolute importance. I and my Committee are grateful to our new National Chairman, Barry Nunn AO and his team who have supported and taken forward this important matter.

All of us in the OAA UK/Europe Regional Group will be delighted to meet up with OAA members visiting Britain. Our activities tend to be focussed in London or Oxford. Please let us know if you are planning a trip. We would love to see you.

Mr Chairman – thank you again for inviting me this morning and I wish everyone a very happy and fruitful 2018.
