



Keeping Culture writers' panel at Tiagarra, Devonport: (l-r) Amanda Reynolds, Auntie Phyllis Pitchford, Julie Gough, Greg Lehman.

I treasure hearing stories

I love the celebration of authors and words at a writers' festival - the energetic buzz of hungry readers hovering around new books, encountering kindred spirits and old friends. But above all, I treasure hearing stories read by their creators.

Anticipating what a person will choose to read, whether they will stand or sit? Smiling if they sway as their story unfolds. Hearing phrases my mind already knows read by a different voice – punctuated, pronounced and dramatised with volume, expression, pauses. Connecting with an author in real time and space and comparing it with the connection we shared in my imagination. These are a few of my favourite things about writers' festivals.

Tasmanian Living Writers' Week 2006 was the first time I've launched a book during a writers' festival. Featuring over 100 events in ten days across Tasmania's beautiful island state, it was the perfect occasion to introduce the National Museum of Australia's latest publication *Keeping Culture: Aboriginal Tasmania*. As I recount the experience of presenting this beautiful book to those who had entrusted their personal stories – their words, their objects, their photos, their wisdom – I feel a rush of emotions, tingling sensations in my spine and skin, tears welling in my eyes.

Remembering is powerful.

A person may re-live an experience from another time and place – of love, joy, happiness, trauma, guilt or sorrow – simply by remembering. So may a community, so may a nation.

Museums specialise in remembering, and if we are honest with ourselves, they can be fairly good at forgetting too. Forgetting is the flip side of the coin of remembrance, and this coin is the main currency of museum business.

Through our contemporary collecting programs at the National Museum, we toss the coin, spin the coin, place it in our palm as though we can somehow see the future. And in some ways we can. There is no doubt what we collect today will kindle the nation's memory in time to come.

The international museum fraternity cannot be accused of forgetting to collect Tasmanian Aboriginal material between the late eighteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. This era which gave birth to Australia (as a nation) was an era where the world's rotation was fuelled by a frenzy of collecting. Ships coming and going, people coming and going, objects coming and going – with seekers and adventurers wanting to explore, expand, execute, empathise.

While the motivations and actions of previous collectors raise many historical and ethical questions, *Keeping Culture* is dominated by one central theme. What have museums remembered and what they have forgotten in relation to Tasmanian Aboriginal people and culture? The number of objects held by institutions coupled with the intense research focus in this area suggests that the coin was tossed and landed on remembrance – suggests we should celebrate. Indeed many objects were collected and much was written *about* Tasmanian Aboriginal people and culture. But as Julie Gough reminds us, there is a flip-side:

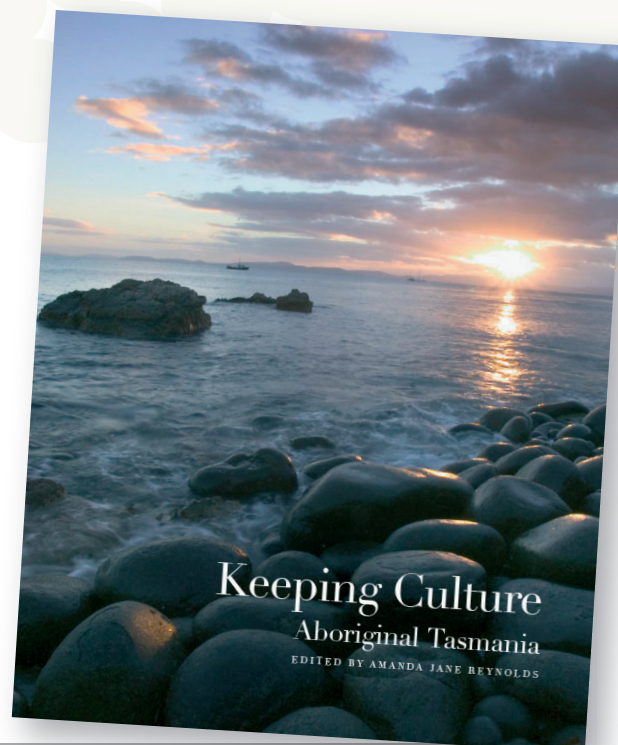




Photo: Deam McNicol

Writers celebrate the official launch of *Keeping Culture in Hobart*: (l-r) Amanda Reynolds (NMA Curator), Greg Lehman, Rodney Dillon, Karen Brown, Tony Brown, Jim Everett, Cheryl Mundy, Craddock Morton (NMA Director), Auntie Phyllis Pitchford, Julie Gough.

The enforced loss of our language and even of our voice, in terms of objects being separated from their histories, was central to ensuring that our extinction trope was maintained in the key sites for disseminating information about cultures: museums. Objects were collected and presented across the world as poignant markers of a disappeared people.

When I began developing the Tasmanian Aboriginal collection I was deeply aware of the past – troubled by the past – even though I was working on a contemporary collecting project. Members of the community helped me re-focus. The past needed to be remembered – for present generations, for future generations, for healing.

Remembering is empowering.

And if I pause now and close my eyes, once again I am at Tasmanian Living Writers' Week. I hear Julie's quiet voice reading to the gathering:

Collecting Indigenous Tasmanian objects without dialogue has left most national and international collections bereft of what gives a collection its heart and purpose: stories.

Snapshots from a kelp collecting trip with artists Vicki, Muriel and Lola form in my mind as I listen to Greg Lehman read from his chapter:

The coast is a nourishing terrain for memory, allowing artists to cast lifelines to a cultural past; counteracting the modern tendency toward historical amnesia by celebrating traditional practice with new formations.

Tiagarra is the last of our three events programmed during the festival. And as I sit listening to the stories,

I smile knowing our collection resounds with heart and purpose. The audience is entranced as Auntie Phyllis remembers:

My mum and dad had a bird shed at the north point on Chappell Island and the first year I truly remember going birding was in 1942.

*First light
Cuppa and a smoke
Then spits in hand
Dad and Bro Vic
Head for the rookery.
A final yell from Dad
'Keep an eye on
The scaldin' pot ya fellas
Gotta be on the boil
When the first load
Gets in ya know...'*

As I close my book and run my fingertips over the front cover, I reflect on the image of the sun rising over Trumpeter Bay, Bruny Island, 2005.

Amanda Jane Reynolds is a Curator at the National Museum of Australia and the editor of Keeping Culture: Aboriginal Tasmania. The book features nine Tasmanian Aboriginal authors and profiles the museum's Tasmanian Aboriginal Collection. It is hardback, 128 pages and available from the Museum shop for \$49.95.



Photo: Deam McNicol

Shell-necklace maker Auntie Dulcie Greeno shares her memories during the Launceston event.



Photo: Deam McNicol

Stephanie Mansell-Allen delighted a drawing she made as a child on Cape Barren Island is included in *Keeping Culture*.