

THE BEAUTY OF INTERACTION

by **Ron Winch, President of the Federation**

The Federation of Australian Historical Societies was inaugurated on 12 March 1977 in Canberra, when delegates from the principal historical societies of each state and territory were present, 64 years to the day after Lady Denman, wife of the Governor-General, named Canberra, and fifty years after the opening of Federal Parliament in Canberra by the Duke of York.

The Federation is thirteen years old but its history goes back to 1961 when the Royal Australian Historical Society held its first conference of affiliated societies in Sydney. One of the things to emerge was a proposal to form a federation of historical societies so that the various bodies would have some bond or union to enable them to share in or profit from the experience of other societies.¹ A short constitution was circulated but the proposal went no further until 1975 when, with the formation of the Historical Society of South Australia, every state and territory possessed its own central or principal historical society.

Discussions were held in 1975 in Victoria, and favourable responses were received from the then Commonwealth Minister for Administrative Services, Senator Reg Withers, on the crucial matter of funding. The Federation became a reality in 1977, its first president the Honourable Mr Justice Rae Else-Mitchell, one of the chief protagonists for federation. He held office until 1986.

At the inaugural meeting, Mr David Yencken, then chairman of the Australian Heritage Commission said:

A national federation can speak with authority to national and state governments and bring weight and status to historical society activities. Perhaps there is an even more important role, that of bringing people of like interests and commitments together wherever they may live.²

Although not all specifically mentioned in the constitution, the Federation's aims have developed to be:

- encouraging the study of Australian history and preservation of historical material;
- publishing history and encouraging its publication by member and local societies;
- establishing and consolidating liaison between member and local societies;
- coordinating activities of member societies and eliminating overlap, especially in activities of a national character;
- developing national history projects;

- presenting the Australian historical society movement as a nationally integrated body, creating a firm base from which to approach government bodies and seek corporate sponsorship;
- providing advice to the Australian Heritage Commission and similar bodies;
- organising conferences and seminars on an Australia-wide basis;
- giving financial and other assistance within the limits of available funds and resources.

Whether the aims are attainable, it is my view that there has never been a greater need for the Federation. Over the last thirty years, the study of the history of Australia has changed greatly. Where once historical societies were ‘voices in the wilderness’, today they are one force amongst a whole family, including academic historians, genealogists, the National Trust, collectors and other specialist groups.

Financially, historical societies are the poor relation in this family with an ageing membership. They need constantly to reassess their role while other members of this family are doing things formerly done by historical societies. In some cases those functions are being carried out in a more effective way, and historical societies should acknowledge that fact.

These other bodies also heighten the awareness of history and heritage, and we welcome their emergence and growth. It results, however, in competing demands for the available people and their talents. It is in the interests of all of us to recognize the part that each heritage-oriented body has to play, and to find ways to minimize duplication of effort. In issues such as this, the Federation takes a keen interest and has an important national role.

In its 13 years, the Federation has achieved a great deal, despite limited funds. It has organized six national conferences and two Antiquarian Book Fairs. In 1988 the executive decided to conduct such a fair in Canberra as part of the Bicentennial celebrations, not only to raise funds, but also to demonstrate the part played by antiquarian book dealers in helping to provide the research resources necessary for the study of Australian history. The fair also demonstrated to departmental officials handling grant money that the Federation was doing all it could to help itself. As a result our grant was raised, enabling the Federation to plan annual rather than biennial conferences.

At the invitation of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, the Federation joined that society to conduct a national conference in Melbourne in 1989. That was the first Federation conference to be held outside Canberra for several years. This Queensland conference makes two in successive years and we want to say how much we appreciate the invitation and that we wish to continue in this way.

In all its activities the Federation has been hampered by distance. The secretariat, located in Canberra, consists of just two people, the president and the secretary/treasurer, and it shares the offices of the Canberra and District Historical Society, to which it owes a great deal. The full executive of the Federation includes two vice-presidents, Dr Robert Nicol, president of the Historical Society of South Australia, and Mr Ian Woodroffe, director of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria.

The Federation relies on a Commonwealth grant-in-aid, distributed through the Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and Territories, and on the profits of its Antiquarian Book Fairs, as well as the contributions from member societies. It makes public comment from time to time on issues of national historical significance, but is prevented from being the loud voice that it would like to be for lack of human resources.

Following the conference, the 1990 Biennial General Meeting of the Federation will be held, at which these and many other issues will be discussed. For 1991, an invitation has been received from the Tasmanian Historical Research Association. As for those societies which the Federation has not been able to visit in its thirteen years of existence, this is not for any lack of interest or concern.

The executive believes that the Federation can and does play a vital part in the historical movement, and appreciates the support and help it has received from its members. However, in that place high up on the Limestone Plains, we sometimes feel icy-cold in our isolation. We would like to hear about any issue of national importance on which you believe we should act.

Since our recent antiquarian fair in May 1990, two of Australia's best-known booksellers have died — Gaston Renard of Melbourne, and Margaret Woodhouse of Sydney who was at the fair. Gaston had sent his apologies. Robert Langdon, historian, author and friend, told me of an incident that epitomises the value of the antiquarian bookshop to the vigilant researcher.

In 1962 when Margaret Woodhouse opened her first bookshop in Miller Street, North Sydney, Robert Langdon made sure he was one of her first visitors. Another one was the well-known bibliophile, Walter Stone, now deceased. On that visit, Langdon discovered a book that was to guide and direct his whole life from that point onwards, *Tahiti and French Oceania*³ by Samuel Russell. He paid ten shillings and sixpence and it was Margaret's first sale. The book mentioned that "in 1929 an extremely old cannon was discovered on the Amanu barrier reef", a little atoll in the Tuamoto Archipelago, west of Tahiti, and that the cannon was taken to Papeete in Tahiti.

Having done some work on Tahiti, Robert Langdon began the research that led him to propound his now well-known theory that

the cannon and several others came from a Spanish ship that disappeared in 1526 on a voyage from the Straits of Magellan to the East Indies. After thirteen years' work, his book was published, *The Lost Caravel*.⁴ In it he proposes the hypothesis that it was the Spanish ship *Sal Lesmes* which lost its four cannon at Amanu. The crew, he propounds, mixed and intermarried with the people of the Tuamoto Archipelago, the Society Islands, and also of Easter Island and New Zealand. Continuing his research over another thirteen years, Langdon has recently published *The Lost Caravel Re-Explored*,⁵ and now being translated into Spanish. He argues quite convincingly that the European or Caucasian appearance of a large number of Polynesians, remarked upon by Captain James Cook and others, was due to the intermarrying of the crew. For his efforts Langdon has won much acclaim, including a knighthood from the Spanish Government.

His remarkable discoveries and the research that continues are attributable to a chance encounter in an antiquarian bookshop. I could tell you of many other similar encounters, but I must conclude this story by urging you not to neglect the valuable research material that can sometimes be found on the shelves of antiquarian booksellers and nowhere else.

NOTES

1. Royal Australian Historical Society, *Conference with Affiliated Societies, Sydney, Addresses and Papers*, 1964 p.3.
2. The Federation of Australian Historical Societies, *Conference of State and Territory Historical Societies. Proceedings*, Canberra, 1977 p.6.
3. Samuel Russell (British vice-consul, Tahiti), *Tahiti and French Oceania. A Guide Book*, 1935.
4. Robert Langdon, *The Lost Caravel*, Pacific Publications, Sydney, 1975.
5. Robert Langdon, *The Lost Caravel Re-Explored*, Brolga Books, Canberra, 1988.