



## COVER SHEET

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**Helen Klaebe is a PhD candidate from the Creative Writing department of the Queensland University of Technology's Creative Industries Faculty and gave a seminar at the Mitchell Library of NSW in late 2005. Her subject was *Partnerships with an Oral Historian and Organisations*.**

### **Public History and Partnerships**

Oral history research methodologies are growing in popularity as a way of capturing contemporary stories, or voices, of the local, personal, public and global experience. An oral historian, as the name suggests, continually works in partnerships — with the people they interview and the organisation they may represent. The purpose of this article was to discuss collaboration, using a case study of my experience writing an organisational history.

From mid 2002 until October 2005 was an epic journey for me. In collaboration with the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and Outward Bound Australia (OBA) I researched and wrote my first book, *Onward Bound: The First Fifty Years of Outward Bound Australia*, as part of a research MA. I initially thought the process would be a straightforward collaborative partnership, but soon learnt the partnership would extend to a far wider realm. 2006 is the fifty-year anniversary of OBA, so I will give you a taste of the history of OBA, a snippet of the colourful people of OBA and talk a little about my personal OBA journey.

When one begins a history project, whether large all small the first question to ask is usually, why collect a history? As a writer, I would simply ask, who is the audience? There is currently huge interest in oral history and public history — or social history - - as it: reflects a human interest in our past; a sense of continuity between the generations; a sense of belonging in neighbourhoods, gives meaning to how we are by what we do (both as an organisation or workplace); and promotes a sense of place and identity in our ever changing world.

An oral history requires great honesty and trust in a partnership or collaboration with the community being investigated and the investigator. This is a story about my partnership with Outward Bound Australia (OBA).

In 2002 Tim Medhurst, the CEO of OBA, heard me on local ABC radio reviewing a book and knew I was just finishing an undergraduate degree in Creative Writing at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). He contacted me and explained a little to me about OBA and as I had grown up in South Australia, I had little idea about the organisation, other than it was an outdoor education organisation. He said some of their key founders had already passed away, others were in their nineties and the Board were concerned and investigating how this problem might be best managed — remembering they were a non profit organisation, with no spare funds.

I agreed to go to OBA's national headquarters at Tharwa, just out of Canberra and meet with the Board and suggested an initial oral history collection be commissioned by the OBA committee as a stopgap measure to ensure founders' unrecorded historical memory was not lost. In fact, my subsequent research uncovered stories of past founders also attempting to capture the history of OBA, but as an organisation of people more concerned with the 'doing' than the recording of milestones, and spare cash for such a venture being historically unavailable, these efforts had failed. OBA, like most organisations has a regular turnover of staff, committee and board members. The formal history was recorded in the meeting minutes, but this did not tell the whole story. Personal interpretation of events, through oral history, can colour a very black and white picture. As an independent writer, external to the organisation, I felt I could offer an impartial, fresh look at their history.

I discovered 217 boxes of archives at Tharwa, piled up in a disused shower block, and found that no staff member of OBA had 'the history of the place' to go through them with me. As I sat in a cold, mouldy, damp room surrounded by boxes I was ready to admit this task was perhaps too big for me. I poked around the top of a couple of cartons, looking at photos and letters from students. A few hours, and a few dozen boxes later, I was still reading — very powerful emotive letters about how much their OB experience had meant to them. As a parent of three teenagers I know it takes a lot to excite one into writing a letter, especially such poignant letters and by so many. I was now intrigued to know what it was about OBA that had caused this. I made a list on the plane as I headed home: target the key people; examine what the organisation *really* is; and find funding.

Financing such a project is always a struggle within any non-profit organisation, yet the social consciousness of our society and how people interact within it is of crucial historical significance in understanding 'who we are' as a society now, what we were in the past and what we will become in the future. Working to overcome this problem then became the challenge that was solved through an organisational and tertiary partnership.

Tertiary institution partnerships with community and industry can be beneficial for all parties. Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) Creative Industries encourages innovative research methodology that allowed part of my MA research to be the creation of primary source material in the form of an oral history collection, and also writing an accompanying manuscript. The tacit knowledge extrapolated from the general population in relation to research is of growing cultural significance in social history and should be regarded highly (Swap et al.)

To understand OBA I needed to start with the history of Outward Bound and the story of its founder -- Kurt Hahn. Hahn was the educator and founder of Outward Bound and other experiential education institutions such as Duke of Edinburgh Awards and United World Colleges (Stetson) His theory of outdoor education has been investigated and expanded worldwide in the last 70 years with mottos such as, "you are more than you think", "to strive, to serve and not to yield" and "your disability is your opportunity".

Hahn was passionate about ancient Greek philosophers, who also valued the art of passing on knowledge through oration, so it seemed fitting to use another of his legacies, Outward Bound, or Outward Bound Australia in particular, as an example of

a successful partnership between an oral historian/ writer, a university and an organisation. Hahn formed a partnership with Lawrence Holt -- the owner of UK's Blue Funnel merchant shipping company during World War II -- as Holt had approached Hahn very concerned about his ships being torpedoed in the Atlantic sea and his men perishing, because they lacked survival skills.

Hahn, who had openly criticised Hitler before the war, had escaped prison and was at the prestigious Gordonstoun School on the rugged coast of Scotland teaching students, including the future Duke of Edinburgh. His philosophy for youth stressed the importance of healthy body and mind and service to others in the community, which was a new concept -- especially in a time where many children left school early to work and in doing so abandoned opportunities to continue sport and often took up adult habits, like smoking. Hahn devised a 26-day course for Holt's sailors, which was the origin of Outward Bound.

Chris Holt, Principal of Marist-Sion, College, Warragul:  
(Sir Lawrence Holt's great nephew)

*My own Dad, Richard Alfred Holt, knew his uncle quite well. Dad was a Merchant Navy Officer on Blue Funnel ships during the Atlantic convoys in World War Two. He suffered the loss of two ships and knew at first hand the terrors and loneliness of being adrift in a life-boat on the North Atlantic*

Next, I examined what was known of the Australian story, which was difficult to trace, as the only person still alive with first hand knowledge of how that occurred was Prince Philip. I soon found the Australian chapter was another great partnership — this time, between Judge Adrian Curlewis and Admiral 'Buck' Buchanan.

Curlewis, a survivor of Changi, and Buchanan a decorated naval officer, were both interested in the wellbeing of Australian youth, and were challenged in a Sydney pub in 1955 by Prince Philip's English messenger. The challenge was to run an Outward Bound program in Australia in 1956, to coincide with the scheduled Melbourne Olympics.

Curlewis had a little more trouble convincing others to support the idea. He had a few companies that would send apprentices and Legacy sponsored young people, but had no location to house the first course. Curlewis used a combination of common sense and tenacity to find a solution.

Sir Adrian Curlewis (1976 transcripts):

*It so happened that, at the time, I was also Chairman of the National Fitness Council in N.S.W., a position to which I had been appointed in 1948. National Fitness had a magnificent new area down at the Narrabeen Lakes, west of Sydney. So as Chairman for Outward Bound Australia (OBA), I wrote to the Fitness Council Chair (myself) and asked would they please try and give us assistance and provide an area where we could hold the first school. I then wrote back to myself, saying we would be delighted to assist the Outward Bound movement.*

I began to realise that this project was not going to be about OBA, but about the people of OBA and about post-war Australian spirit and determination.

The first course was held at Narrabeen, in November 1956, officially meeting the challenge set, but also convincing many more people about the qualities Outward Bound had to offer the youth of Australia.

Admiral Buck Buchanan, with the help of a newly appointed committee, searched for a suitable permanent location and eventually Fisherman's Point on the Hawkesbury was chosen. It was again difficult to trace the history through the sanitised meeting minutes alone, so I also interviewed Curlewis and Buchanan's sons: Ian Curlewis, and Rob and James Buchanan to enliven the detail.

The early years at Fisherman's Point and the story of Outward Bound Australia's first warden, Warwick Deacock came to light. Deacock was another fascinating character and his story also included the inspirational, adventurous partnership that he and his wife Antonia shared.

I continued to interview the obvious list of founders and key staff members across the decades and was developing my own secondary list of the not so obvious, yet key people who were an integral part of the organisation. Every inch of my journey was packed with stories — stories that were the history of OBA and its people. Again they were stories of partnerships, relationships and pioneering spirit.

As the social climate was changing in the 1960s (and having a fiercely independent wife and small daughter of their own), the Deacocks saw it as inevitable that girls would become a part of OBA. Curlewis and Buchanan approached another World War II veteran, Joyce Whitworth, and invited her to become the Director of the OBA Girls' School. For information on the girls' history, I spoke with Joan Elliott, Laurie Jaeyes (who were early instructors) and Godfrey Wincer, who was OBA's Executive Director at the time. Each had their own moving story of how they became so involved with the organisation — revealing to me more and more about the essence of the organisation itself.

A fifty-year history encompasses changing social thinking and practices. It can reveal how we evolve into what we are today. As a public historian/writer, a decision has to be made with participants and with the organisation about how history is remembered. My relationship with the university was clear from the start with OBA. I would be recording the history from an impartial, balanced viewpoint, including any tragedy.

I investigated other outdoor educational excursions where fatal accidents had occurred to gain a better perspective of the relatively few accidents in OBA's history. I scoured and compared newspaper reports, all of which differed -- coroner's reports-court hearings, personal testimony — using oral history interviews, staff reports, and Board minutes. Like a detective, I pieced together events to try and make some sense for affected families. People still wanting to know details, like where memorials were located, contacted me for information. Oral history helped to bring answers and the sensitivity of tragedy in a way that a news report at the time never could.

The history of OBA continued, while safety and educational issues were constantly being reviewed. The changes within OBA were in step with the cultural changes within society and by the 1970s the person in charge was changed from 'Warden' to 'Director'.

Bill Friend, a staunch supporter of OBA, returned from investigating Outward Bound schools in the UK and US in the early 1970s and suggested holding a shorter course for younger boys aged 12-16 years. Garry Richards had worked at Fisherman's Point in his tertiary breaks, and had then become a teacher at Cranbrook. He became involved in Friend's 'pack and paddle' courses, which were held in the school holidays and his relationship with OBA would go on to span 30 years.

Not everyone wants to be nostalgic and reminisce about the past and not everyone made themselves available for interview. OBA has had over five thousand staff members and more than two hundred and fifty Australians have been 'Outward Bound' in the last half century. I had to assess my approach and ensure my methodology was robust enough to still produce a collective history -- without needing to interview everyone.

The philosophical justification of oral history as a credible social science, the ethical elements and procedures involved, the ordered technical knowledge, the art of interviewing and data collection practices were all important factors to consider. Oral history practices for organisational projects need to be of a high standard to ensure its continuing credible usefulness, not only for the publication of this fifty-year history), but as a primary source of information that is able to be accessed in subsequent years by researchers.

Oral history interviewing (as a participatory research method) produced an abundance of information, which I needed to characterise to discover where participant's stories would intersect and overlap with each other and with the archived history. Cross checking of transcripts with formal historical evidence for verification helped to "close the methodological gap," to meet the rigorous demands imposed by social sciences. (Ritchie)

I was interested in interviewing anyone who could fill the gaps — from all points of view. As the organisation grew, there were views and counterviews — all which had to be recorded and collated to help verify the traditionally collated history.

Not everyone is easy to find either. Some people who were involved in OBA were now retired, while others' details were unknown or unlisted. The difficulties in tracking people down were unbelievable, but I felt obliged to, so I could really do justice to the people and their history and so I persisted.

The OBA history was continually full of firsts, offering new educational opportunities for adult, student, disabled, science and corporate expeditions. This project was also a first for my faculty too. New trends in industry and the corporate worlds towards oral history need to be realised and incorporated into more tertiary study programs.

The story of OBA is about the development of Kurt Hahn's philosophy into a well-managed non-profit organisation, which is a world leader in outdoor education in research, teachings, occupational health and safety issues and as a training facility -- all with elaborate systems that have evolved over the last 50 years. My record keeping systems also evolved, as I devised a system of how I would allow the interviewees to be collectively supportive of the way they were represented in the book. By allowing

interviewees to see how they were ‘positioned’ within the text of the manuscript, they had an opportunity to make editorial comments.

Over the last fifty years OBA has also provided great service to the community — not only through the inclusive courses they offer, but also by the community service component of each course. I could also argue that QUT has helped serve the community and OBA by allowing my MA of research in creative writing to illuminate their story. Many other non-profit Australian organisations have similar inspirational stories to tell, but no resources to manage such an undertaking. Perhaps smart collaborative partnerships like mine could provide an answer. By producing the book from the oral history collection, these great stories of ordinary Australian people doing extra-ordinary things with the public became accessible to the broader community.

After completing my MA in mid 2004, I was able to present my work at the International Oral History Conference in Rome. For those of you who have experienced Outward Bound first hand, you will understand the term ‘solo’. Rome was my ‘solo’ — my time of reflection of the journey so far. I presumed that the transcripts and the thesis were likely to languish in the ‘too hard basket’, to progress any further. Serious money was needed to back the publication of the manuscript. I felt disillusioned, because my task was over, but too many people had given of themselves with their stories and I found myself the ‘keeper’ of these stories that they had entrusted into my care. I felt obliged to get try and get it published.

There is a saying, ‘it’s not over ‘til it is over!’ I found the only person willing to underwrite the publication was Tim Medhurst, who had initially taken a punt on me as a new graduate being able to pull the OBA history together. The production process became another project altogether and another partnership — this time between the two of us. Choosing a publisher, weight of paper, photographic research, captions, maps, editing, indexing and design style all needed to be managed.

A further fifteen months and many countless hours later, the book *Onward Bound: The First Fifty Years of Outward Bound Australia* was published. The most satisfying feeling for me, as a writer, was to receive many heartfelt thankyoues and congratulations from the people who let me ‘collect’ their stories, including a thankyou from someone who refused to participate in the project, but who was very pleased with the thorough way the research was conducted and portrayed.

The collaborative partnership of Tim Medhurst and I had met the challenge, by hard work and a little tenacity, to guarantee the publication was ready in time for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of OBA this year. HRH Prince Philip was kind enough to read and verify sections of the text where he was mentioned, like all the other participants of the book. He was gracious enough to also write the foreword, allowing the story of Outward Bound Australia to travel full circle.

Outward Bound has an ethos centred on its commitment to all people in the community; making an oral history of ‘all the people’ involved with OBA was an appropriate methodology to capture their collective spirit.

***On ward Bound: The First Fifty years of Outward Bound Australia can be purchased online at: <http://www.outwardbound.com.au/> All proceeds go to supporting future young Australians in benefiting from an OBA program.***

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