

Obituary

Doreen Wheeler (1940–2009)



Doreen Wheeler

Doreen was as an archivist, a teacher, an academic, a sculptor, a musician and a writer.

In 1963 she completed a Bachelor of Arts degree with honours at Queensland University, majoring in history, and obtained the Library Association of Australia Registration Certificate specialising in archives administration. Doreen commenced her career in archives with her appointment as Deputy State Archivist in Queensland, a position she held from 1963 to 1965.

Doreen then taught for a number of years in Sydney schools, notably as a history teacher at Kambala Girls' School in Rose Bay. She resumed her archival career in January 1971 when she was appointed Deputy Archivist at the Archives of Business and Labour at the Australian National University in Canberra. In the years that followed, Doreen's academic, professional and administrative skills came to the fore in her contribution to the consolidation of the archives' scattered holdings. She was responsible for organising the transfer of records from some of Australia's most significant unions and pastoral companies, among them the records of the Seaman's Union. At this time she also began lecturing

on archives to students undertaking librarianship qualifications at the Canberra College of Advanced Education.

In 1976, Doreen moved to Melbourne to begin work at BHP, which at the time was Australia's largest company, as the company's first professional Corporate Archivist. During the 1980s Doreen became the company's most senior female executive with her promotion to Superintendent Group Information Services. While at BHP, Doreen established precedents and achieved major breakthroughs that put the company's archives on a sound professional footing, effectively transforming an amateurish collection of records into one of the finest business archives in the country.

While in Melbourne, Doreen also took a leading role in the formation of the Australian Society of Archivists. As the society's second secretary (1977-1979) she made a significant contribution to developing the professional role of archivists in Australia. She drafted the curriculum of the Postgraduate Diploma in Information Management at the Melbourne College of Advanced Education, which became part of the University of Melbourne, and coordinated the establishment of the society's approach to accreditation in 1979-1980. Doreen was also a member of a ministerial group providing policy advice to the Victorian Government on the management of public records, and a member of the National Archive Forum, a lobby group aiming to influence Federal Government policy and set national standards.

Following her resignation from BHP in 1986, Doreen took up a position with the Melbourne Port Authority as Manager of Corporate Information. Doreen retired from full-time work in 1988 and spent six months on a solo trip around Europe. This was a trip that she recorded through many hundreds of carefully classified photographs and in journals she kept of her travels. Doreen had always been an inveterate traveller, although her opportunities were limited. After university she travelled around Australia, sometimes working as a waitress as she did in Alice Springs, sleeping under the stars on the top of a semi-trailer in the Nullabour.

In conjunction with her work as an archivist, Doreen also worked professionally as an educator, particularly in the field of archives and records management. She tutored in Australian history at the

Australian National University, in the Postgraduate Diploma in Librarianship at the Canberra College of Advanced Education, and marked student assignments for more than a decade at the University of Southern Queensland, where her work as an external marker was highly regarded. She was a lecturer in the BHP Management Training Centre in Melbourne and gave lectures on professional issues to various public and professional groups in Sydney and Melbourne, at Monash University and the Melbourne College of Advanced Education.

In 1989, Doreen's contribution as a professional archivist was recognised by the Australian Society of Archivists and she was awarded a honorary life membership.

Doreen's greatest joy – apart from her son and her grandchildren – was in gaining the opportunity to give reign to her creative urges. Doreen and her husband Jim moved to Toowoomba when he took up an academic post at University of Southern Queensland. She enrolled in a Bachelor of Creative Arts at the university which she completed in 1992, majoring in sculpture. In her 1993 graduate's exhibition the reviewer selected three works for specific mention. Of Doreen's installation the reviewer wrote: 'Displayed in the large room of the [Toowoomba City Gallery] Doreen Wheeler's "Vertical Reality", with its imposing carved pine logs and drawings, has a majestic presence'. She immediately started work for further exhibits, showing work in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney. Doreen's perspective was on big works and, she took her *Vertical Reality* installation to a gallery in Brisbane. Another work *Temporal Frameworks* was an installation at Kiss My Art Gallery in Fortitude Valley consisting of three large panels and twelve wall pieces. Always interested in the concept of time and its artistic representation, Doreen's work explored the temporal nature of existence around the human form. In her artist notes for the exhibition she wrote: 'without embodiment, time is a meaningless concept.'

Other sculptures exhibited included a quirky piece entitled *Home Suite*, which she exhibited in the Gasworks Outdoor Sculpture Exhibition in Melbourne during October 1994, a work she subsequently donated to the Skinners Adventure Playground in South Melbourne. Doreen was invited to submit the following year and had commenced working on a piece called *Sunflowers* when she was diagnosed with late-stage

lung cancer in August 1995. The news was devastating, coming in the midst of a very productive period when she also produced a sculpture called *Artemis* for an exhibition in Brisbane celebrating the twentieth anniversary of International Women's Day. Each sculpture had to be constructed of matchboxes and hers depicted a standing figure which referenced Artemis of Ephesus. She had a solo exhibition of 22 pastel drawings in Toowoomba. Her final completed piece was a sculpture called *Core Sample* made of steel, fibreglass, chain and paint. This was exhibited in Brisbane and, with some modifications, in Sydney, and is presently mounted in her home in Noosa.

Doreen's first encounter with cancer saw the premature end to her promising career as a sculptor, but with the determination and courage which was a characteristic of all aspects of her life she took up music after moving with her husband to Noosa. She discovered the timpani and fell in love with these large instruments. She worked hard and uncompromisingly at mastering the instrument. Later she studied technique in Brisbane after receiving a set of lessons for her sixtieth birthday. Her lessons continued for some years and she became a very proficient player. During this time she also studied for the Australian Music Education Board music theory exams, receiving a credit in grade 5. She sat no further exams because she would have been required to work on other percussion instruments and she was always adamant that she was a timpanist not a percussionist. During those early years in music Doreen took on the publicity for the Noosa Chorale, of which she was not a member, and for The Occasional Orchestra.

Doreen played with the Sunshine Coast Orchestra for ten years, and was its president for two. She was instrumental in ensuring the orchestra played serious and challenging music. The last concert in which she performed was Holst's *The Planets*, having urged the orchestra and the conductor to perform it. The concert at St Mark's Anglican Church in Buderim, together with Saint-Saens's *Organ Symphony*, was an outstanding success vindicating Doreen's musical vision.

Earlier, Doreen had also played in a series of concerts with The Occasional Orchestra in Noosa, organised by Leonard Spira, which provided her the rare opportunity to play timpani in a number of full symphonies, including one of her favourite composers, Sibelius. When

The Occasional Orchestra ceased performing, she set about learning a number of other symphonies just for the love of the music, including Tchaikovsky. Doreen's last concert was *Carmina Burana* with the Noosa Chorale. This is a very showy piece for timpani with many difficult passages. Although she had not played for some time before the concert she spent many hours every day for some months first getting up to technical standard and then learning the work, a very telling picture of Doreen's character and musicality.

During the early years of her musical development she faced the uncertainty of her cancer recurring. In 1995, she had received radical treatment at the Wesley Hospital followed by surgery. She was one of the successes of the program – celebrated in some papers in overseas medical conferences – as her life was prolonged beyond 3–5 years, after which statistically there was a negligible survival rate. She told few of her friends about her cancer history and when she did, she was met with disbelief given how active she was and how well she looked.

Doreen learned of her new cancer in October 2008, two days after her husband Jim came out of hospital following a hip replacement. She did not tell him for two weeks to allow him to focus on his own recovery. That took immense courage especially since they were always such a strong support for each other in adversity. Even as her new cancer spread – a different type, untreatable, aggressive and insidious – she maintained her poise and her appearance. To those close to her it was surreal to see how well she looked while she declined in energy and strength throughout the first half of 2009.

Following her move to Noosa, Doreen also became involved in a number of other activities alongside those relating to music. She was secretary of the Gallery Society for two years and joined the U3A Book Club. One of its long-standing members, the last meeting Doreen attended was three days after returning from hospital at the end of May 2009, independently trailing her oxygen bottle behind her at the Noosa TAFE campus. She also joined the Shakespeare Reading Group, which she enjoyed immensely, and a Sunshine Beach group of jolly women, called the Tuesday Book Club. She also trailed her oxygen to her last meeting there.

In later years, she joined the executive of the Noosa Film Society where she was secretary for three years and on the committee for four. The last film she recommended, *Frozen River*, which she had seen at the Sydney Film Festival in 2008, received an ovation at all screenings hosted by the society. Doreen was an avid film buff and she insisted on being taken in her wheelchair to see the film *Star Trek* on the weekend before she died for none other than nostalgic reasons. It was a fun occasion, if tinged with sadness, for all three members of the family.

The original *Star Trek* TV series was one of the few she watched while bringing up Andrew as a sole parent in the 1960s. Her strength of character, her love for her son and her determination to give him the best saw her through very difficult times, when she taught in Sydney and then worked in the archives at the Australian National University.

That is where she met her future husband who turned up from Monash University where he was a postgraduate student. Doreen had written an article on the holdings of the Victorian Teachers' Union, which was part of Jim's research interest at the time. They had a commuting relationship until they married by the Carillion on Aspen Island beside Lake Burley Griffin in December 1975. The first six months of the marriage continued at a distance until Doreen's appointment as BHP's archivist.

It was a journal article which brought Jim and Doreen together. Doreen was a good historical researcher and writer. She wrote four entries for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, and edited a monograph for a 1981 exhibition she jointly curated in Melbourne, *Images of Yesterday*, on behalf of the Australian Society of Archivists. She wrote monthly articles for the *BHP Management Journal* and had numerous articles published in *Archives and Manuscripts* and other journals. Doreen's article 'Business records and the sole archivist creating an archives', which was published in *Archives and Manuscripts* (vol. 7, no. 3, August 1978, pp. 101-09) was a classic articulation of the challenges facing an in-house business archivist and remains relevant in 2009. As she turned to her artistic talents at the end of the 1980s, an interest in creative writing developed with the birth of her granddaughter, Sasha.

It was when Sasha came to Australia as a seven-year-old with her father Andrew that Doreen started telling her the story of a little girl

called Frin. She then developed the idea and began writing a full-length novel for pre- and young-teenage girls. The story of Frin, a diminutive, spunky, adventurous child, in *Getting Back from Borsadania*, occupied a great deal of her time in recent years and she submitted the manuscript to a number of publishers. The novel is yet to be published, however efforts are still being pursued. Children and adults who have read it find it hard to put down. One of the publishers, who made a number of suggestions for the book, wrote 'you have created an intriguing landscape with unusual characters that would appeal to a readership. You have a fluid, easy style of writing that was enjoyable to read.'

Doreen spent a lot of time in her last weeks laboriously writing a series of what she called 'Last Letters' to a number of friends. They were full of compassion, love and wisdom, which will be treasured by those who received them. She wrote a long letter to her granddaughter Sasha - a guide for living well. Unfortunately, she was too weak to finish it off, but the four pages of a grandmother's wise advice will serve Sasha a lifetime.

Doreen's was a life well led. She wasted none of her time and opportunities. She set high moral standards for herself and did nothing by halves. She was serious about life and its issues. Modesty forbade her from boasting about what she might have done and what she achieved was often cut short only by circumstances over which she had little control. She had, as Shakespeare put it in *Antony and Cleopatra*, 'the courage of a woman'. Indeed, she was a true feminist, a model looked up to by her sisters and her numerous nieces. She made new beginnings for herself when disaster struck and circumstances changed. She was personable but very private, moderate but elegant in her views, not a slave to fashion but always well-turned out. She listened carefully to people and her responses were considered. But, she would stand her ground when she was sure she was right. She loved fiercely. She had a smile that lit up the room. She will be always missed. But she will live on in our hearts and in the lives of those she has touched.

Composed from a eulogy written by Jim McDonald and Doreen Wheeler's citation by Peter Crush in *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1989