

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE TASMANIAN HISTORICAL RESEARCH
ASSOCIATION HELD IN THE ROYAL SOCIETY ROOM, TASMANIAN MUSEUM
AND ART GALLERY, ON TUESDAY 8 APRIL 2014.**

Present: The President, Caroline Homer, in the chair and about 45 members and guests.

Minutes: The minutes of the previous meeting were read, and approved.

Business: The President referred to the Association's planned excursion to The Channel Heritage Centre on 12 April and a 'Hidden Sandy Bay' walk on 25 May. Ann Thwaites spoke of an event at the Steppes on 27 April; the next Port Arthur talk would be on 16 April.

Speaker: The President introduced Steve Thomas of 'Roar Film' as one who had written and produced various historical documentaries. Mr Thomas declared his subject to be 'History, Television, and the Cult of Personality', warning that the story about to unfold was not an altogether happy one. The controlling powers in television were not much interested in history, save for the depiction of wars. International audiences had but little concern for Australiana. Likewise disinterested were Englishmen, who still had much sway in the local industry. Against this background Mr Thomas invoked some outstanding achievements in historical-documentary television. 'Culloden' a BBC production of 1964 challenged historiographical conventions and was innovative in technology; some commentators saw it as an implied protest against the current war in Vietnam. The 1990 production in the USA of a series on the American Civil War had similar quality, effectively using old photographs and 'talking heads'. Simon Schama's 'History of Britain' had remarkable breadth of scope and scholarship; likewise an American series brilliantly portrayed jazz as the music of American democracy. All these projects encompassed big ideas with bold imagination. In Australia ABC's 'Frontier' programs of 1997 had some flaws yet succeeded in presenting both indigenous and settler perspectives. Subsequent years saw such good work by Film Australia as evident in its programs on Mabo and cane toads, but overall there was failure to maintain such a standard. The great fault was the cult of personality and over-dramatisation; quest for ratings was an underlying dynamic, with concern to minimise costs also at work. The ABC's program about Mike Howe was a supreme example of the effect of these debilitating forces. 'Dumbing Down' was further evident in the 'Who's Been Sleeping in My House' programs, which invoked superficial human interest, and were relatively cheap and easy to make. The celebrity cult was further evident in the ABC's use of an Englishman, Tony Robinson, to tell Australian history, while judging that even Thomas Keneally lacked sufficient appeal for such a role. Lack of imagination diminished 'Utopia Girls' wherein the able historian Clare Wright, was confined by a lifeless script. Withal there were some gleams of happier outcomes. Indigenous filmmakers had found both compelling themes and relative freedom of action, resulting in such powerful work as 'Redfern Now' and 'Croker Island Exodus'. Currently Raw Films were in negotiation for producing 'Death or Liberty', based on the history of convicts transported to Australia for their espousal of radical politics. It would draw inspiration on a recent documentary based upon the Napoleonic Wars, a relatively inexpensive project but having potent quality.

After several questions, the President thanked the speaker for his presentation, which had included splendid use of technology. The meeting closed at 9:15pm.

Michael Roe for Secretary

Caroline Homer, President