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RESEARCHING, PRESERVING AND COLLECTING AUSTRALIA'S HERITAGE



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Trust the women:¹ *women lead the way in preserving Queensland's heritage*

One of the first events organised by the Australiana Society's Queensland Chapter was a visit to Miegunyah, the historic house museum owned and operated by the Queensland Women's Historical Association in Bowen Hills, Brisbane for the past 50 years. For the visit in June 2018, local member Judith McKay acted as a guide, giving members a snapshot of the association and its extensive museum and archival collection; recently she undertook a significance assessment of the collection under the National Library's Community Heritage Grant program.² Here she tells the story of the association and its pioneering efforts to preserve Queensland's heritage.

1.

Miegunyah in 1886, soon after it was built for the Perry family, well-known Brisbane ironmongers. The house is on the Queensland Heritage Register as a fine example of a substantial single-storey timber residence. Photograph: John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, neg no 41592

2.

Miegunyah dining room.

Photograph: Queensland Women's Historical Association archives



JUDITH MCKAY

The Queensland Women's Historical Association (QWHA), established in 1950, is one of Queensland's leading historical societies.³ A self-funded voluntary organisation, it began as a branch of the state's oldest historical society, the (later Royal) Historical Society of Queensland, which had been founded in 1913. Though the parent society had always included a few women members, it provided no activities especially for women and some found its evening lectures difficult to attend. The QWHA's founding goals were to interest women in Queensland history, particularly that of pioneer women; to organise social functions at Newstead House, Brisbane's oldest surviving residence, which it shared with the parent society; and to arrange outings to historic places.⁴

Women from across Queensland were invited to join the new group, especially those related to pioneers. Many of the early members had links to notable pioneers – premiers, senior public servants, pastoralists and the like – while

others were notable in their own right, such as medical scientist Dr Josephine Mackerras, medical practitioner Dr Eleanor Bourne, educationalist and philanthropist Josephine Bedford, nursing administrator Eunice Paten, federal politician Senator (later Dame) Annabelle Rankin, and Brisbane's first female alderman, Petronel White.

In 1954 Martha Young (1900–1967) became president, eventually holding office for 12 years. A woman of enormous energy and organisational ability, she gave the association new impetus: membership rose to over 1,000 and activities expanded greatly. Tension developed between the two historical societies and in November 1965 “the women” were asked to leave Newstead House. Fortuitously, just as they were looking⁵ for a new home, a colonial house in nearby Bowen Hills came onto the market. A state-wide appeal was launched for its purchase; this succeeded and in June 1968. Miegunyah was opened as a folk museum and the association's headquarters (**plates 1–2**). The association remains one of the few historical societies in Queensland to own its own premises.

Preserving places

Among Mrs Young's initiatives as president was a scheme, begun in 1961, to mark places of outstanding significance to Queensland by fixing plaques explaining their history (**plate 3**). This was inspired by London's famous “blue plaques” scheme which she had observed during a recent visit.⁶ The scheme was not confined to Queensland. In 1964 she and the secretary, Gyneth Campbell, travelled around England and Scotland to mark several places there, including Caldrees Manor, Ickleton, the former home of Queensland's first premier, Robert Herbert. In all, before the project ended in the 1980s, some 90 places were marked. The project was unique in Australia⁷ and pre-empted official heritage protection in Queensland by 30 years, predating the establishment of a local branch of the National Trust (1963) and the passing of state heritage legislation (1992).

The association also pioneered heritage conservation in Queensland. In 1979 another visionary president, Lorraine Cazalar (1934–2009), obtained a grant through the National Estate program to engage heritage specialists,



Richard Allom Architects, to undertake a conservation management plan for Miegunyah; this has guided the house's conservation and interpretation almost to this day. The work not only represented best practice but was also pioneering, for in 1979 the heritage movement in Australia was in its infancy. Though the Commonwealth had recently introduced heritage legislation (1975), Australia ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites), the country's leading organisation of heritage professionals, was still drafting its "Burra Charter" for places of cultural significance.

3.

Plaque formerly fixed to Carlton, Brisbane, the home of medical practitioner and naturalist Dr Joseph Bancroft, now demolished. The first plaques were of blue enamel, like the London prototypes. Photograph: Queensland Women's Historical Association archives

4.

Mrs Young receives, on the association's behalf, a silver spade from Queensland premier Frank Nicklin in 1957. The spade, made by Walsh Bros of Melbourne, had been presented to Governor Bowen in 1865 when he turned the first sod for the Great Northern Railway. It was donated by his granddaughter and sent from London via Queensland's agent-general. Photograph: Queensland Women's Historical Association archives

5.

Medallion quilt made in England c 1808 by Elizabeth Kent and kept by her descendants in Australia for more than 150 years. It was brought by her military officer son, John Kent, who was appointed to the Moreton Bay penal settlement in 1839 as Deputy Assistant Commissary General. The quilt's chintz fabric includes Egyptian motifs fashionable at the time of its making. Photograph: Queensland Women's Historical Association archives

Preserving collections

From its inception, the association has been active in historical collecting, often in conjunction with its lectures, publications, outings, exhibitions, place-marking, etc. Mrs Young set up the archives-library collection and never missed an opportunity of adding to it (plate 4). For instance, in 1955, with the cooperation of the *Sunday Mail* social editor, she appealed for photographs of Queensland governors' wives; needless to add she was successful.

The artefact collection is extensive, comprising about 15,000 items, many of which furnish Miegunyah's several recreated rooms. The collection has particular strengths in costume and textiles (plate 5), but also includes furniture, domestic and personal items, artworks, toys (plate 11), handicrafts, jewellery, medals and souvenirs.

Given its early membership – not to mention its direct approaches to descendants of governors, etc – the association was able to collect outstandingly significant material that would normally have gone to state collections. At the time it had few competitors in Queensland actively collecting historical artefacts, for it was not until 1966 that the Queensland Museum established a history section and for years this was more interested in technology than social history, while other specialist



6-9.

John Wilson Carey, cabinetmaker (1828–1902), and Matthew Fern, carver (1831–1898), davenport for William Pettigrew, 1873. Queensland yellow-wood and other timbers, 100 x 67 x 65 cm. The masks on the console supports are portraits of Pettigrew's daughter, Margaret, for whom the davenport was made. Photographs: Judith McKay



museums were yet to emerge. The material collected was recorded in the association's newsletters, initially the *News Sheet* and later *Historical Happenings*, hence many items have detailed provenance, a situation rarely encountered in historical collections assembled without the help of museum professionals.

Of the material collected in the early years, two collections are particularly significant: the Bowen collection, relating to Queensland's first governor and later Victoria's governor, Sir George Ferguson Bowen and his wife Diamantina, Lady Bowen; and the Herbert collection, relating to Queensland's first premier and later imperial statesman, Sir Robert Herbert. Both collections comprise papers, artworks, photographs and books, and, in the case of the Bowen material, domestic items and jewellery. The latter includes a spectacular gold and emerald bangle presented to Lady Bowen in 1867 on her departure from Queensland, which has already featured in *Australiana*.⁸

Other significant material includes the christening robe and slippers worn in Scotland in 1815 by Patrick Leslie, later to become the first white settler on Queensland's Darling Downs; the autograph book of Catherine Macarthur (later Leslie) of Parramatta and the Darling Downs, kept in 1835–67; the name plate from the rooms of Queensland's first female medical practitioner, Dr Lilian Cooper; the full walking out uniform, including a rare bonnet, worn by Queensland army nurse Winifred Croll during World War I; a ball gown worn by Queensland's first female federal politician, Senator Annabelle Rankin, during the royal visit of 1954 (plate 10); and the dress worn by Queensland's first female governor, Leneen Forde, at her inauguration in 1992 – the list is endless.

The collection includes many heirlooms – such as bridal costumes, christening robes, shawls, quilts and Bibles – that have been passed down families for generations. One heirloom was of special interest to

Australiana Society members on their recent visit: a carved and inlaid davenport made in 1873 for Brisbane sawmiller William Pettigrew, which was donated by his

granddaughter a century later (plates 6–9). The davenport, made by the noted local craftsmen John Wilson Carey and Matthew Fern, features 37 species of Queensland timbers, making it a triumph of local materials as well as craftsmanship.

The *Queenslander* newspaper of 23 August 1873 has the following description:

The framing of the davenport ... consists of deep tinted yellow-wood, which, being well polished, presents a beautiful appearance. The trusses are of plum tree, and the manner in which they are carved reflects great credit on Mr Fern, George Street, who executed this portion of the work. The lid of the stationery case is of *lignum vitae* and tulip wood, tastefully inlaid in the form of cubes and triangles, surrounded by a border of forest oak and muskwood. This lid is in itself an exquisite specimen of workmanship, but undoubtedly the most striking parts of the whole davenport are the front and back panels, which exhibit great skill and patience on the part of the workman, while affording specimens of the most useful and ornamental Queensland woods. The front panel is especially interesting in this respect, the design being a "star" composed of pieces of the following woods [34 listed] ... The back panel is of equal beauty, also containing a large number of woods. Although of course the chief interest attaches to the production on account of its composition, beauty is by no means sacrificed to utility...⁹

Though the collection purports to focus on women, much of the material collected in earlier times relates to men – important men – rather than women and shows a broader interest in white settler history than just women's history. In recent years the association has adopted a more specific collecting policy, focusing on women and the furnishing of Miegunyah, and has begun transferring to other public collections, particularly state collections, material that is beyond the scope of the present policy and more appropriately housed elsewhere.



10.

Humpty Dumpty soft toy made by Lady Chermiside, the wife of Queensland's governor, for Miss N Hutchison in 1903.

Photograph: Queensland Women's Historical Association archives



11.

Gown worn by Senator Annabelle Rankin (1908-1986) to Brisbane's gala ball for the royal visit of 1954. The ballerina-style gown, made of layers of pink and yellow tulle, attracted attention. Brisbane's *Truth* newspaper of 14 March 1954 reported that it was "one of THE frocks of the night ... Her colouring provided all the appeal of an apricot chocolate ice cream." Photograph: Judith McKay

12.

Miegunyah's name plate carved by pioneer woman architect and association member Beatrice Hutton (1893-1990). In 1912 she became the first woman admitted to an architectural institute in Australia. Photograph: Judith McKay

Summary

For almost 70 years the Queensland Women's Historical Association has been active in preserving Queensland's heritage. Besides collecting historical material, it has pioneered heritage protection and the conservation of historic buildings. Without its valiant efforts much of Queensland's history and heritage would have been lost, and such significant material as the Bowen and Herbert collections would never have come to Queensland. Its contribution deserves more recognition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. This article's title is drawn from the "Trust the women" women's suffrage banner painted by Dora Meeson Coates (1869-1955) and carried by Australian women in London's suffrage procession of 1911; it is now in the Parliament

House Art Collection, Canberra.

2. See Judith McKay, *Queensland Women's Historical Association. Significance Assessment of the Collection*, downloadable at www.miegunyah.org.
3. Until 1957, the Association was called the Women's Historical Association. See www.miegunyah.org.
4. Jean Stewart, "Background to the birth of *Miegunyah*: the (Royal) Historical Society of Queensland and the (Queensland) Women's Historical Association, 1950-1968", *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, vol 22 no 8, Feb 2015 p 611.
5. *Ibid* p 619.
6. London's "blue plaques" scheme was launched in 1866, on the initiative of politician William Ewart (1798-1869), to mark the homes and workplaces of famous people. Since then the scheme has been administered by successive organisations, including, at the time of Mrs Young's visit, the London County Council. Now it is the responsibility of English Heritage.
7. Lorraine Cazalar, *Not Only a Plaque but also a Story*, Queensland Women's Historical Association, Brisbane, 1979.
8. *Australiana* vol 40 no 2, May 2018 p 30.
9. *Queenslander* 23 Aug 1873 p 2.



Dr Judith McKay is a museum consultant and historian, for many years on the staff of the Queensland Museum. Her publications include *Queensland architects of the 19th century: a biographical dictionary* which she co-authored with her husband Donald Watson. In recent years she has undertaken significance assessments of some of Queensland's major museum collections and until 2016 served on the Queensland Heritage Council. Contact her at mckay.watson@bigpond.com.