

# Digging for more

One Canberra man is fascinated by knowledge that falls through the cracks, **Sally Pryor** writes

**S**ometimes you have to look between the cracks to see how everything fits together. Peter Kabaila spent 15 years discovering this, a process that resulted in his recently published book *Survival Legacies: Stories from Aboriginal Settlements of Southeastern Australia*.

It's a lengthy account, told through photographs, stories, maps, family trees and history, of what it means to be Aboriginal in urban Australia.

Kabaila himself is not Aboriginal, but a Canberra architect from a Lithuanian migrant family, who has a penchant for amassing fields of knowledge. He has found himself over the years listening to stories, finding connections and building a narrative.

"It's not really a big surprise, because the best areas of research are the ones that fall in between disciplines," he says.

Having moved to Canberra in 1983 with his wife Amanda Gaunt – also an architect – on a three-month contract to work on New Parliament House, he opted to stay in Canberra and eventually branch out from straight architecture, a decision that has led him to record the lives of Aboriginal communities. The architectural practice he runs with Gaunt, Black Mountain Projects, specialises in education in heritage consulting, and Kabaila has accordingly stocked up on qualifications, including a PhD in archaeology at ANU and an education diploma from the University of Canberra.

It was back when he was working towards an honours thesis in archaeology in 1993 that his supervisor suggested he look into an archaeological reconstruction of an Aboriginal mission.

"I spent that year working on the Warangesda mission site near Griffith in Western NSW," he says. "What surprised was there was nobody else that I knew in Australia who was actually looking at Aboriginal fringe camps and reserves from a sort of physical point of view – who was there, where they lived, what they

did there. People were doing it historically, on a political level . . . But I just think Australia is such an untapped thing. There's a real shortage of local history."

He learnt during that year about the complex family connections that form and link Aboriginal communities, and the importance of household lists and family trees in telling their stories.

"What I discovered was that people had written about Aboriginal missions and reserves and the reserves system from a historical point of view, but there were photographs, there was oral history, there were historical records, and if you mesh them all in together . . . you build up a bit of an idea of what the place was like, but you need all those sources.

"You need the family stories, the family tradition, the unsubstantiated stories, the historical records, the archaeology, the site survey, the site measurement, the old photographs – you need all that stuff for it to make sense."

He has, accordingly, been collecting "all that stuff" for years, and has published three books and several research papers about it, including a historical survey on the infamous Cootamundra Girls Home, a potent place of sadness and dislocation. It was only in the past two years, however, that he realised the entire body of work belonged together in one volume.

The result is a complex account of how Aboriginal communities have managed to survive in an urbanised, European-dominated society. Kabaila is the first to point out, though, that this book is only half the story of the First Australians. In fact, he says, it really only covers areas "within easy distance of Canberra". This is largely because much of his work as a heritage architect involves giving heritage advice to shire councils; his main office is his car, as he travels regularly to Queanbeyan, Yass, Griffith, Leeton, Cootamundra, Picton, Moss Vale, Goulburn, Culcairn and Lockhart. He can't see himself branching out further with his research into Aboriginal societies, which shift and change the further west you go.

"Even as you move out of the east coast and coastal fringe, you start to see differences between communities in Narrandera and Cowra, and the cities and coast are all urbanised communities. But when you get further west, there's a shift, there's difference.

"I think the message to my fellow white folk is that there are cultural differences between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people, but one of the big things is that the extended family is still the big thing, so blood ties are important, blood ties are what make Aboriginal families strong.

"There's a whole lot of issues about political correctness . . . [but] I think things have changed a bit, people are thinking in broader terms now. But there still is a big industry out there of really trying to contain Aboriginal people and pretty much locking them into the stereotype of the past."

The book demonstrates, above all, that this stereotype no longer applies, especially when it comes to the long-urbanised indigenous communities.

He's happy to let someone else pick up the thread and keep researching, because for the moment, he has quite a different project on the go, one that stems from a



trip to Vietnam last summer to help build extensions to an orphanage. "I didn't know anything about Vietnam. I'd done some volunteer English tutoring to one young Vietnamese migrant – that was my only connection with the Vietnamese."

He spent nine weeks working with the nuns at the Huong Phuong Orphanage, nestled deep in a devout Christian community in the centre of the country.

The country, he says, while defying all of his preconceptions of that part of the world, generated some unexpected echoes of his childhood.

He grew up in a "reffo" family in the 1950s; he describes his parents as "Calwell's mob", beneficiaries of immigration minister Arthur Calwell's displaced person's scheme who fled Lithuania and arrived in Australia via Germany in 1949.

"Just like all the kids who grew up in reffo families in the '50s, I learnt English when I arrived at school, and went I went back home and the gate to the yard closed, I was no longer 'Peter', my name changed and if I spoke English to mum and dad I was chided for being a 'little Australian,'" Kabaila says.

Travelling to Vietnam and seeing the images of smiling Communist Party members – a side to the country that people often overlook – brought back memories of staying with relatives in the Soviet Union in the early 1980s.

He also saw patterns in family networks that he recognised from his time researching Aboriginal communities back home.

"There are other things, like this Asian tendency, a bit like the Aboriginal – everything along family networks, that's how everything works. The network is not the individual, the network is the unit.

"Some travel confirms all of your prejudices, but for me it was very transformative."

Once the construction project was finished, he returned home and immediately began devising further ways to help the orphanage.

"It's got 80 disabled people and nine nuns that work there, plus the 40 nuns who are in the mother house in the main convent building.

"When I got back I started planning what to do next, and my wife very kindly allowed me to go back in Easter for another three weeks. I went back with some money from some Canberra Vietnamese, some Australian friends and some money of my own, and did things that were non-building-related, so we got a fleet of bicycles for the orphanage, and a couple of washing machines for the sisters, and some internet computers."

He has also donated the proceeds from this week's book launch – his book is self-published – to funding another tertiary scholarship for a woman from a subsistence rice farm in Huong Phuong village.

• For more information on the association, visit <http://hporphanage.asn.au/>

• For a review of *Survival Legacies* see page 29.

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**Lasting Beauty Photography Workshop with Peter Garnick**  
Develop your image capturing and processing skills  
6 – 7 Aug | 9:00 am – 12:00 noon | \$125 per person  
Bookings essential | [peter@petergarnick.com.au](mailto:peter@petergarnick.com.au) or 0423 068 833

**Lasting Beauty Exhibition**  
An exhibition of spectacular photographs by Peter Garnick  
Closes 7 Aug | Visitor Centre Gallery | Free

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Theatrette | 12:30 pm  
Entry by Donation

**Travelling Stock Reserves: A Legacy for All**  
Sue Mathams | 4 Aug

**My Little World: Bernard Fennessy Memorial Lecture**  
Julia Cooke | 11 Aug

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Alex Smart | 25 Aug

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