

Tradition and its transformation: Joan Kerr, housewife to historian

Susan Steggall



Joan Kerr (1938-2004)

In an interview in 1986 Joan Kerr described Sir Nicholas Pevsner as ‘an inspirational teacher’ who changed her from a housewife with two small children into an architectural historian.¹ It is a remark that neatly sums up the journey taken by Kerr from a stay-at-home twenty-something mother to the mature scholar and author of major publications in Australian art and architectural history. Not content simply to accept established traditions in these scholarly fields she developed her own sense of historical production by privileging context – time and place – to bring to life the societies in which artworks and buildings were created.

Her approach was quantitative rather than a qualitative. She proved her points not with theory, but with what was to become a trademark piling-upon-pile of examples. If, in 2002, Julie Willis and Bronwyn Hanna were ‘rather apologetic about privileging “empirical recovery over feminist readings of the history of women

¹ ‘Talking heads’, *Art Club Newsletter*, No.3, February 1986.

architects in Australia''', Kerr urged them not to be. 'Only through this sort of exemplary detailed research can the old master myths be laid to rest,' she wrote.²

However this approach creates difficulties for those who try to analyze her work as they too risk resorting to 'lots and lots' of examples (a favourite Kerr expression) and ending up with a kind of list that could seem either bewildering or irrelevant to the reader. It is easy to get caught up in Kerr's cornucopia of knowledge but very difficult to know when and where to stop.

Pastures new

Before the Kerr family (Joan, her husband James and their two children Tamsin and James) left Australia for Switzerland in 1963 Joan Kerr was interested in art and architecture in the way she was interested in all things cultural and creative. Although she is on record as saying she would have liked to study architecture, her primary focus at university (in Queensland) lay in literature and drama.

In London in 1966 Kerr's first foray into further education was a series of lectures on the great buildings of Europe. However the course was not nearly challenging enough to satisfy Joan Kerr's restless intellect and thirst for knowledge and she then enrolled in a two-year diploma certificate on mediaeval art and architecture at the Courtauld Institute. Kerr also attended evening lectures at the Warburg Institute given by art historian Ernst Gombrich, lunchtime talks at the Victoria and Albert Museum and lectures on the baroque by Anthony Blunt. It was however Sir Nikolaus Pevsner who made the greatest impact on her.

On home ground

Joan Kerr returned to Australia at the end of 1968 and in 1969 applied to the Power Institute at Sydney University to enrol in a Master of Arts degree (MA). Because Bernard Smith, Professor of Contemporary Art and Director of the newly created Power Institute of Fine Arts, believed students needed a proper grounding in European tradition – art and architecture from the sixteenth century to the present day, as taught at Melbourne University – in order to understand Australian art, he insisted she first undertake Fine Arts I and II.³

After successfully completing both courses Joan Kerr was offered a tutorship in Fine Arts and spent five years in the post, during which time she took her students on excursions to examine buildings as well as art, sometimes extending the official agenda with interesting detours along the way – a style of empirical fieldwork, that

² Joan Kerr, review of *Women architects in Australia 1900-1950*, Julie Willis and Bronwyn Hanna eds, (Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 2001) in *Art Monthly Australia*, vol.152, August 2002, 18-20.

³ Susan Steggall, interview with Bernard Smith, December 2006; *Dr John Power and the Power Bequest. The Power Institute and The Power Foundation: An Illustrated Survey*, Sydney: Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, 1976, 9-11.

owed much to Sir Nikolaus Pevsner.

Embracing the Gothic

Under Pevsner's guidance Joan Kerr had intended to concentrate on the mediaeval sculpture and architecture of France and England. However once back on home soil she seized the chance to stake a claim in an under-researched field by changing her focus from Europe to Australia and convincing Bernard Smith to allow her to undertake an MA on colonial church architecture.⁴

Kerr was interested in the way Gothic architecture had been reinterpreted in Australia, not only as a revivalist style but also to evoke memories of England. Her MA thesis – *The Development of the Gothic Taste in New South Wales as Exemplified in the Churches of the Colony: from the Beginning of Settlement up to the Establishment of the Victorian Gothic Revival Style at the End of the 1840s* – was, ultimately, quite controversial in that it crossed boundaries between art, architecture and history before such practices became acceptable in Australian universities.

In acknowledging those who had assisted her, Joan Kerr made special mention of Pevsner 'whose general principles of architectural history' she had tried to apply to her topic. She had also aimed to emulate Pevsner's comprehensiveness and thoroughness in her intention to document *all* churches in NSW in the first fifty or so years of the colony's existence.

Kerr began her MA thesis with the churches that introduced the Australian Gothic revival in the Macquarie era (1810-1822) although, she argued, they only did so because of later additions and alterations to their fabric. To examine this 'primitive and unwitting historicism' Kerr included a large amount of detailed building history, not only to establish the type of the late Georgian church built in the colony but also to explore an attitude of sentimental romanticism in Australian colonial architecture. She also developed a secondary theme – along the lines of 'architecture without architects' – in her conviction that amateurs were designing and remodelling churches. In so doing, Kerr introduced the idea of the *bricoleur*, do-it-yourself ethos in colonial settler society well in advance of the 1992 Sydney Biennale and its theme of the enterprising 'boundary rider'. A good example was Elizabeth Macquarie who was a competent landscape gardener although her tastes were closer to the picturesque ideals espoused by characters in Jane Austin's novels than they were to architectural theorists.

It was Elizabeth Macquarie who had insisted on an evocation of the mediaeval Reculver church ruin in England as a suitable model for a church in the Parramatta landscape.⁵ A 'more obvious case of pure associationism' was the first real 'Gothick'

⁴ Martin Thomas, 'Recorded interview with Professor Joan Kerr (1938-2004)', Oral History Section (TRC-4878), Canberra: National Library of Australia, September-November 2003 (NLA Interview), 24.

⁵ MA thesis, 18; also in Kerr and Broadbent, 'The English background', in *Gothick Taste in the Colony of New South Wales*, Joan Kerr and James Broadbent eds, Sydney: David Ell Press (in association with the

church in the colony – Christ Church Newcastle, built in 1817 under Macquarie’s direction by Captain James Wallis, Commandant of the Coal River Settlement. According to the Bigge Report, after the first plan for the church was discarded, convict Joseph Lycett was asked to prepare a new design for a larger building.⁶ Kerr discovered that Mrs Macquarie employed Lycett as a draughtsman and put a case for the design of the Newcastle church as being by the Scottish-born Elizabeth Macquarie. Kerr backed up her claim with the fact that the church in Newcastle was quite unlike any other in the colony, its only apparent stylistic source an eighteenth-century Scottish kirk where the bricks were covered with rough-cast cement and the dressed free-stone corners left exposed – a common masonry technique called ‘harling’.⁷

The Macquarie era was the heyday of Francis Greenway’s career as colonial architect, but after the Macquaries left there was a significant downturn in his fortunes. Greenway found it difficult to make a decent living from his profession and his wife supported both of them by keeping a school. He turned his hand to almost anything – from landscape gardening to extortion.⁸ In her Franz Philipp Lecture at the 1992 conference of the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ), Joan Kerr developed the theme of ‘Somersaults in the Antipodes’ to evoke the perceived ‘upside-downness’ of *terra australis* allied to a similar invertedness of moral and social values.⁹ This theme gave Kerr the chance to introduce a pair of early nineteenth-century oil paintings depicting the interior of Newgate Prison at Bristol – ‘rare, possibly unique survivals, attributed to Australia’s first official colonial architect Francis Greenway, an inmate of the Bristol Newgate in 1812 before being transported to NSW for forgery’.¹⁰ While Greenway’s convict past has never been denied in Australia, his importance as the architect of many of New South Wales’ early colonial buildings has pushed his image as a felon into the background. Kerr relished the chance to re-visit these fascinating glimpses of the flesh-and-blood man behind the elegant architecture as a way of bringing alive the colourful and dynamic aspirations of the young colony.

The construction of a Georgian Gothic parish church before 1820 was (here Kerr quotes Kenneth Clark) normally motivated by conservatism rather than by fashionable upper-class romantic ideas. A design of 1819 by Francis Greenway in an English Gothic-style for St Andrew’s Cathedral would not only remind people of

Elizabeth Bay House Trust), 1980, 39.

⁶ MA thesis, 19. John Thomas Bigge (1780-1843) issued the report of his royal commission on 5 January 1819. He authorized an investigation of ‘all the laws regulations and usages of the settlements’, notably those affecting civil administration, management of convicts, development of the courts, the Church, trade, revenue and natural resources.

< <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs>>

⁷ MA thesis, 25.

⁸ Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, 45.

⁹ Joan Kerr, ‘Somersaults in the Antipodes’, *Australian Journal of Art*, vol. 2, 1993, 9-29.

¹⁰ Joan Kerr, ‘Somersaults in the Antipodes’, 10.

Britain, and look striking in its proposed setting, but would also be layering 'Gothic dress on a Georgian church'.¹¹ Across town, the initial somewhat idiosyncratic design for St Mary's Catholic Church (1821-1830) came from a very different, although equally associationist source. The man in charge was Father Therry, a known Francophile who wrote fluent French and left property to the French Jesuits so it is not surprising that he was inspired by plans from Catholic France rather than Anglican England.

Next Kerr looked at Georgian 'Gothick' churches extant in NSW from 1824 to 1836. Again she privileged a previously unacknowledged contribution by a woman, Lady Isabella Parry wife of Sir Edward Parry, Commissioner for the Australian Agricultural Company based at Stroud. Kerr claimed her as the likely designer for Stroud's St John's Church of England, although she felt Parry lacked the 'architectural tastes of Mrs Macquarie'.

The section in Kerr's thesis on the 1836 Church Act (which aimed to encourage new church construction through the provision of Government subsidies) is exceptionally lengthy because of much new material she unearthed about the building history of Church Act churches.¹² She wanted to establish a 'comprehensive typology' for each of the major denominations and trace the growing importance of the architectural profession in NSW between 1836 and 1844, a period that was strongly controlled by the central ecclesiastical authorities. Kerr included detailed analysis of the five major churches in the 'Church Act' style: St Andrew's Anglican Cathedral Sydney (1837-42); St Paul's Church of England, Cobbitty (1840-42); Holy Trinity Church of England, Miller's Point (1840-45); St John the Evangelist's Church of England, Camden (1840-49); St Patrick's Catholic Church, Church Hill (1840-45). Even though a combination of amateur designer and artisan builder was typical of the period, the role of the adventurous amateur was coming to an end and when Edmund Blacket (1817-1883) arrived in 1842, the architect began to assume total responsibility.¹³

In exploring the relative importance of the amateur and the professional, Kerr found that the major figures responsible for introducing and encouraging innovation in the Victorian Gothic revival Anglican churches in NSW were senior clergymen, often bishops, who played a hands-on role in church design, such as Bishop William Grant Broughton (1788-1853). Broughton possessed an extensive collection of books on architecture and the dispersal of his library, plus a general ignorance about architectural books, were seen by Kerr as major disadvantages to a comprehensive knowledge of English influence on church architecture in the colony. Until all

¹¹ MA thesis, 34-6.

¹² *The Church Act* of 1836 provided Government subsidies for clerical salaries and for new church construction. Originally intended for Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian denominations Governor Bourke later extended the provisions of the Act to other denominations including the Jewish, Wesleyan and Baptist communities.

www.sl.nsw.gov.au/discover_collections/history_nation/religion/places/act.html

¹³ MA thesis, 291.

material concerning source books had been adequately catalogued, she was convinced that no comprehensive judgements on stylistic sources could be made.

Kerr concluded her thesis with a regret that so few early churches had survived and virtually none in their original condition. 'There is not a single Church Act church extant in NSW that one can point to as an unaltered example of the style,' she wrote. 'The future of church buildings in Australia looks even blacker than the future of the Church.'¹⁴

Her examiners, architectural historian Professor John Freeland (1920-1983) and historian Associate Professor Ken Cable (1929-2003), found positive and negative aspects in Kerr's thesis although neither was sure whether to position it as history, architectural history or art history.¹⁵ She must have felt somewhat uneasy about the reception of her thesis as she contacted Ian Jack, a scholar of Australian history and Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Sydney University. Jack began a letter to her by saying that although her work might suffer from falling between disciplines, she was underrating the thesis and that he considered it 'essentially a first-rate study in historical archaeology'.¹⁶

One of Kerr's earliest publications on Australian architecture, written during her MA candidature, was a review of the history of Glebe by Bernard and Kate Smith – both eminent historians and residents of that Sydney suburb.¹⁷ Since Kerr was in the process of completing her postgraduate degree it would seem quite a bold move to critique her professor who was also her supervisor. In hindsight, her review of the Smiths' book, together with reviews of two books published by the Australian Council of National Trusts, give pointers to her later scholarly strengths as a pioneer academic in the developing discipline of heritage architecture.¹⁸

¹⁴ MA thesis, 293-4.

¹⁵ Examiners' reports dated 19 August 1976, accompanying a letter from Ian Jack to H. Bryan, University Librarian, Fisher Library, 3 June 1977.

¹⁶ Letter from Ian Jack to Joan Kerr in York, 6 September, 1976, quoted in James Semple Kerr, *Joan Kerr: a Pictorial Biography, 1938-2004*, Sydney: 2006, 57.

¹⁷ Joan Kerr, Review of *The Architectural Character of Glebe Sydney*, by Bernard and Kate Smith, Sydney: University Co-op Bookshop, 1973, *Art and Australia*, vol. 12:2, 1974, 133.

¹⁸ Joan Kerr, review of *Historic Houses of Australia*, Australian Council of National Trusts, Melbourne: Cassell, 1974); and *Early Colonial Houses of New South Wales*, by Rachel Roxburgh, (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1974), *Art and Australia*, vol.13:1, 1975, 42.

Ambitions abroad

The Fine Arts Department at Sydney University was proving somewhat intransigent in its attitude to PhD topics, so Kerr decided to look elsewhere, even before she had submitted her MA thesis.¹⁹ It seems a tall order to overlap two major postgraduate projects but Joan Kerr was a scholar in a hurry when both she and her husband James Kerr enrolled for doctorates at the Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies, University of York, to commence in 1974. Since their subjects concerned Australian architecture they were allowed to spend the first year carrying out fieldwork at home and only set out for York in August 1975.

Although Joan Kerr had been awarded a travelling scholarship, resources were limited so theses had to be completed in the shortest possible time. She maximized use of her earlier research so that her D.Phil thesis, *Designing a Colonial Church: Church Building in New South Wales 1788-1888*, was heavily based on her MA, differing only in the extension of the cut-off date from the late 1840s to 1888, with condensation of the original material and new material added to cover the extra decades, beginning with the establishment of early Victorian associational Gothic in the second half of the 1840s.

Kerr researched four hundred churches in all, grouped into five main periods: early colonial Georgian and Regency; 'Church Act' buildings of 1836-46; early Victorian archaeological Gothic churches; high Victorian styles, and late Victorian local and English designs. Her compilation of a preliminary listing of architectural books known to have been in New South Wales at the time, plus a comprehensive bibliography of Australian and English material, made good her intention to remedy the 'state of ignorance' (mentioned in her MA) with regard to the cataloguing of source books.

She selected churches ranging from primitive buildings of rammed earth and wood to elaborate Gothic revival cathedrals because they represented a type or movement, and sometimes 'just because they [we]re there' – social artefacts that illuminated the tastes of their colonial designers, architects and builders. As in her MA thesis, Kerr highlighted the importance of the amateur designer in the colony and the relatively minor role played by the professional architect before the middle of the nineteenth century.

Again Kerr begins her thesis with a discussion of the attempt to reproduce a rural Georgian church in the colony's first two permanent churches at Sydney and Parramatta as expressed in the work of Francis Greenway, followed by examples ranging from the Reverend Johnson's 'temporary place of worship', to Governor King's 'Saxon' additions to St Phillip's, Mrs Macquarie's Reculver towers, the harled church at Newcastle, and the Gothick follies of Father Therry (St Mary's Cathedral).²⁰

¹⁹ *Pictorial Biography*, 54-5.

²⁰ In architectural terms, a 'folly' is an ornamental building, usually a tower or mock Gothic ruin (*The Oxford Concise Dictionary*, 8th edn R E Allen ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). Kerr was also using the

With the passing of Governor Bourke's Church Act in 1836, church building became more standardised in scale and appearance since architects had to be employed to qualify for government grants – and possibly less interesting to Kerr who was always on the lookout for a creative amateur designer.

In England, Kerr noted, Gothic churches had to be large, cheap and urban but since Australian society was sparse and rural, it was neither possible nor desirable to impose English styles wholesale on Australian communities. The best of the later Victorian architects was John Horbury Hunt (1838-1904) who was able to modify the English high Victorian Gothic style to suit local conditions, as in Armidale's splendid 'rogue Gothic cathedral'.²¹ There were other significant attempts to design for local conditions, for example orientation towards (or away from) the sun and in favour of prevailing breezes, or Bishop Polding's desire for stone tracery in the windows of St Patrick's Cathedral to prevent the glass breaking in Sydney's westerly ('brickfielder') winds.

When she returned to Sydney in December 1977 Kerr applied to the Recruitment Division of the Public Service Board for the position of Senior Education Officer, Art Gallery New South Wales and was advised on 28 December 1977 that she had been accepted. However change was in the air again as James Kerr was to take up the post of Assistant Director, Australian Heritage Commission in Canberra at the beginning of 1978. Joan Kerr then applied for a job in Fine Arts at the Australian National University and was offered the position of tutor, to cover art from the late nineteenth century to the emergence of modernism.

While living in Canberra Kerr also worked on projects in Sydney. Most significant was her collaboration with James Broadbent on the inaugural exhibition at Elizabeth Bay House in March-April 1979 – *Colonial Gothick: the Gothic Revival in NSW 1800-1850*. Kerr also wrote reviews of exhibitions on architectural themes. The first of these was for another exhibition at Elizabeth Bay House on the work of colonial architect John Verge who arrived in the colony voluntarily, but with the ambition to make his fortune as a gentleman-farmer. It was fortunate for New South Wales that he was forced to return to the building trade he had learned in London for, in less than eight working years (1830-1837), he gave his new country the most elegant buildings it was ever to know.²²

For Kerr, the exhibition was of 'real historic importance' because it gave Australians a chance to see what was at present known of Verge and his work. The use of 'at present' gives those same Australians an interesting slant on Kerr's view of scholarship as fluid, never done and dusted. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the exhibition for Kerr was the production of a comprehensive catalogue as a permanent public record. Although it was 'thorough and not too weighty to be of immediate use in following the exhibition', Kerr would have liked a rather 'more

term in the sense of an eccentric, over-elaborate or excessively costly design.

²¹ D.Phil thesis, 428-30.

²² Joan Kerr, 'Mr John Verge', *Art and Australia*, vol.16:1, 1978, 34.

lasting memento' with more photographs to make the catalogue both a souvenir and a permanent research tool.

Kerr also reviewed an exhibition in the King's Hall, Parliament House Canberra of the work of architect Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937) and his artist-designer wife Marion Mahony Griffin (1871-1961).²³ Again the fact that the exhibition added to the public record of Australia's cultural heritage was its most important feature.

The year after the successful *Colonial Gothick* exhibition, its catalogue (written largely by Kerr since Broadbent was in England at the time) was published as *Gothick Taste in the Colony of New South Wales*. Kerr was excited about this, calling it her 'first real book'. She had good reason to be proud of it. According to architect Clive Lucas, Broadbent and Kerr had brought to life for the first time, a neglected aspect of colonial society:

The governor's palace and the workman's cottage, the creations of sophisticated professionals and ham-fisted amateurs, monuments to the taste of bishops, Scotsmen and ladies have been chosen to illustrate the particularly antipodean flavour imposed on this imported style.²⁴

Bringing to life colonial society was something Kerr increasingly strove to inject into her writing. This had the effect of transforming her work into what historian Greg Dening calls a 'performative art'. Her descriptions of 'Gothic' objects popular with those who could afford them could almost read as stage directions for a play:

Houses with fireplaces modelled on mediaeval tombs, garden follies made of tree trunks or plaster copies of tree trunks, paintings – or even lamps – depicting mourning ladies wilting beneath Gothic ruins, were all visual equivalents of the Gothick novel. Their purpose was to arouse the emotions rather than the intellect and to conjure up moods and associations rather than to represent genuine mediaeval objects accurately.²⁵

Associationism, a term favoured by Kerr, has meaning across several scholarly disciplines. As an aesthetic theory, popularized by Archibald Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (published in Edinburgh in 1790 and available in the colony), it refers to that affection for the architecture of the past strongly dependent on the associations that old buildings arouse.²⁶ In Australia, romantic associations

²³ Joan Kerr, 'Walter Burley Griffin', *Art and Australia*, vol.17:1, 1979, 36-7.

²⁴ Clive Lucas, Foreword, *Gothick Taste in the Colony of New South Wales*, Joan Kerr and James Broadbent eds, 7.

²⁵ Kerr and Broadbent, 'The English background', *Gothick Taste*, 11.

²⁶ *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, Alan Bullock, Oliver Stallybrass and Stephen Trombey eds, London: Fontana Press HarperCollins Publishers, 2nd edn, 1988, 55.

were of even greater importance than they were in Britain because of a longing for the faraway English countryside and its picturesque ideals. From the very foundation of the colony the rocky landscape lining Port Jackson had been likened to Europe's ancient ruins of towers and battlements. Again Kerr argued that the earliest and most enthusiastic advocate of picturesque possibilities was Elizabeth Macquarie in her designs for the grounds of Government House and the Orphan School in Parramatta and the area around the Domain in Sydney.²⁷

By the 1840s 'the trickle of Gothic buildings had turned into a flood, an inundation that was greatly assisted by English architectural pattern-books' often owned by women. It was Jane, not Sir John, Franklin who owned a copy of John Claudius Loudon's *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture*, 1833. Designs by artist Georgiana McCrae for the houses she and her husband erected in the early 1840s are the only proven instance of female 'vernacular' design but, Kerr argued, a growing accumulation of circumstantial evidence makes plausible the suggestion that women were largely (albeit anonymously) responsible for the popularity of the Gothic *cottage orné* in New South Wales in the 1840s and 1850s.²⁸ These picturesquely gabled and barge boarded cottages built by the professional classes were often designed by their owners including Colonial Architect Mortimer Lewis, lawyer and politician Robert Lowe and artist Conrad Martens.²⁹ One large but 'stylistically confused' *cottage orné*, the extant Bronte House (c.1843), was described by Kerr as 'an amusing mongrel Gothic-Italianate design' that probably owed much to the picturesque tastes of Georgiana Lowe, its first chatelaine.

On a grander scale, Government House and its 'attendant embellishments', composed as if set in a painting by seventeenth-century neo-classical landscape painter, Claude Lorraine (1600-1682), marked the apogee of picturesque Gothick; Sydney University's buildings signified the triumph of the early Victorian Gothic revival style. Whether Australian Gothick evolved in either a 'light-hearted and amusing aristocratic English manner' or a 'crude and serious' provincial way, by the mid nineteenth century, English heritage had become Australian tradition.

In her parade of priests and settlers Kerr created a vibrant tableau of a society of energetic people, at least the white and mostly well-off ones (although she does discuss the terrace houses and workers' cottages of Paddington and The Rocks), determined to find themselves a place in the sun. Emotions, ambitions and creativity (good and not so good) plus a little folly added colour, texture and vitality to what could be a dry and dusty record.

Occasionally Kerr gives readers a glimpse into the personalities of those who worshipped in the churches, as when describing Bishop Broughton as open-minded in allowing the use of the term 'altar' rather than 'communion table' although he

²⁷ Kerr and Broadbent, 'The English background', *Gothick Taste*, 13-4.

²⁸ Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, 34.

²⁹ A bargeboard is an ornamental board fixed to the gable-end of a roof to hide the ends of the roof timbers; Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, 96-9.

balked at stone altars as ‘an unwelcome perversion that ‘encourag[ed] the notion of an actual and not a spiritual sacrifice’. The reasons for building many of the churches also enabled Kerr to provide insights into colonial life. William Boydell, the owner of the Cam-yr-Allyn property, reputedly erected St Mary’s at Allynbrook as a condition for marrying Broughton’s daughter, Phoebe. Lieutenant Edward Charles Close provided an amateur design for St James’ Church of England at Morpeth (1837-41) and built the church and parsonage at his own expense (apart from a government grant of £1,000) as a result of a vow he made when his life was spared in the Peninsular War.³⁰

In an interview for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Kerr presented herself as a pioneer and her book and exhibition on Gothick taste as the first study of what happens when a European cultural movement (early Gothick revival) is imported to a remote and alien land with a small population. Later, in the Victorian period, respect for nature and admiration for the distant past went hand in hand with a concomitant disregard for the immediate past and Kerr regretted that so much early nineteenth-century architecture had been demolished in the rush to modernize. In publicizing the book *Gothick Taste* Kerr hoped to encourage people to delve into their own history and send her information to add to her growing database – a pattern that was to be repeated many times over the next twenty years.

Broadening horizons

From 1978, Joan Kerr joined (and served on committees of) the National Trust ACT, the Royal Australian Historical Society, the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ) and the Australasian Victorian Studies Association. As well as her regular courses in Fine Arts at ANU, Kerr lectured in the History Department and at the School of the Built Environment, University of Canberra.

In advance of a major project on Edmund Blacket, Kerr wrote a lengthy essay ‘Early and High Victorian: the Gothic Revival architecture of E T Blacket and Horbury Hunt’, that appeared in a *Festschrift* to Bernard Smith.³¹ The main thrust of Kerr’s argument was that Hunt had always been praised for producing ‘highly-individual buildings mostly ahead of his time’ while Blacket’s Gothic designs were seen as mere ‘assemblages of details culled from copy-books’. The aim of her essay was therefore, to defend Blacket as a man *of* his time against architectural historians who denigrated him for being an imitator. Kerr also aimed to show that ‘Hunt’s wider and more inventive borrowings have been overlooked for the curious reason that to trace specific sources and influences on his architecture would somehow demean its quality’. Instead of judging nineteenth-century architects by modern

³⁰ Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, 74-6.

³¹ Joan Kerr, ‘Early and High Victorian: the Gothic revival architecture of E T Blacket and Horbury Hunt’ in *Australian Art and Architecture: Essays Presented to Bernard Smith*, Anthony Bradley and Terry Smith eds, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980, 17-32.

standards of originality, she argued, it would be more useful to examine them in the light of their own architectural context as 'typical products of their respective generations'. According to Kerr, the two architects' maiden works – Blacket's design for the church of Holy Trinity at Berrima and Horbury Hunt's design for the Anglican Cathedral at Newcastle – 'perfectly exemplify the early Victorian imitator and the High Victorian eclectic'.³²

If Blacket arrived in 1842 with the aim of creating replicas of mediaeval parish churches on Australian soil, twenty-one years later Hunt was inspired by the high Victorian Gothic movement to create something more personal out of the culture of the middle ages. Blacket brought with him books and designs by A C and A W N Pugin plus copies of the new English *Building* magazine. Hunt also relied on books and trade journals but his 'Gothic heroes' belonged to a younger generation of British architects who had begun to explore mediaeval buildings from other countries and obscure locations. Blacket's most ambitious early building was the late perpendicular/early Tudor style main block of Sydney University (1854-1859). Unusually, this did not derive from the colleges of Oxford or Cambridge despite the fact that, traditionally, university architecture was dependent on such prototypes. As Blacket wrote, 'it is impossible for an Englishman to think of a University without thinking of Medieval Architecture'.³³ Here Blacket reveals something Kerr does not explore in depth – namely a respect for scholarly tradition in the use of the Gothic style, at least in the case of a university – other than an unexamined nostalgia for 'home'.

Since Hunt was able to modify the conventional English Victorian Gothic revival style to suit local conditions, he was a more stylistically sophisticated architect than Blacket who, encouraged by patrons yearning for the romanticized past epitomized by mediaeval parish churches, only wanted to reproduce England. If Blacket's method of designing might have been the *common* way of constructing a medieval revival building in England it was the *only possible* design method for Australian conditions because of the lack of original examples. Each architect, Kerr concluded, achieved his aim and 'if today we prefer the local adaptations to the English parish church replicas it is probably because we no longer see ourselves as a society of exiled Englishmen'.³⁴

Edmund Blacket

Any examination of Anglican church building from the mid 1840s to the late 1860s is necessarily a study of churches designed by Edmund Blacket who is said to have

³² Joan Kerr, 'Early and High Victorian', 17.

³³ Joan Kerr, 'Early and High Victorian', 24.

³⁴ Joan Kerr, 'Early and High Victorian', 31-2.

been employed on one hundred churches in his lifetime, of which about sixty have been proven to be entirely his design.³⁵

As a prelude to her 1983 exhibition of Blacket's work, Kerr published an article entitled 'Edmund Blacket's contribution to Australian church architecture'. In this she concentrated on the man rather than his work, set within the context of the social and ecclesiastical milieu of the new colony.

In a letter of introduction from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Blacket is described as 'conversant with all that is essential to the successful management of schools for General Education' so that on his arrival in Sydney in November 1842, he was assured of a good position. Since his supporters and mentors within the Anglican Church were the Bishop of Sydney, William Grant Broughton, and the rector of Christ Church St Lawrence, William Horatio Walsh, it was perhaps inevitable that Blacket became a designer of churches. According to Kerr, Broughton had been waiting years for someone like Blacket – 'a gentleman, a churchman, a medieval architectural enthusiast, a draftsman who could draw details that an illiterate builder could get more or less right without supervision and a reliable estimator of costs and time of building programmes'.³⁶

Blacket's energy and enthusiasm made him a man after Kerr's own heart – a man to be admired for putting up his 'elegant house plate inscribed "Architect and Surveyor" with some bravado and a little private trepidation'. As Blacket wrote to his brother Frank, 'There is nothing to be gained here by hiding one's talents in a Bushel' and, confident of his own abilities and judgement, he 'hop[ed] to have a great hand in improving the taste of the discerning Public upon Ecclesiastical Architecture'.³⁷ Like Kerr, Blacket was not afraid to buy into controversy. He maintained his allegiance to correct mediaeval construction 'in spite of all the efforts of its church building committee to thwart the architect', giving people what he thought was good for them rather than what they liked.³⁸

The first parish church designed *and* built by Blacket was the small rural church of Holy Trinity, Berrima (1846-1849), an almost complete copy of St Peter's in Biddestone, Wiltshire, a fifteenth-century building illustrated in Pugin's *Examples of Gothic Architecture* (London, 1838-40). The highest form of praise one could give a Blacket church, Kerr has written, 'was to say that it looked just like an old village church at Home'.³⁹ She argued that it was difficult, late in the twentieth century, not only to grasp the concept of wanting to perfect a common ideal while working in isolation twelve thousand miles from one's sources, but also to understand

³⁵ Joan Kerr, Introduction, *Edmund Thomas Blacket (1817-1883): Our Great Victorian Architect*, Sydney: The National Trust of Australia, 1983, 5; MA thesis, 288.

³⁶ Joan Kerr, 'Edmund Blacket's contribution to Australian church architecture', *Heritage Australia*, Summer 1982, 38.

³⁷ E T Blacket, letter to Frank Blacket, 22 December 1849, ML 697, quoted in Joan Kerr, 'Edmund Blacket's contribution to Australian church architecture', 38.

³⁸ Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, 138.

³⁹ Joan Kerr, 'Edmund Blacket's contribution to Australian church architecture', 43-4.

a culture for which Britain meant everything. Yet both concepts are fundamental to an understanding of Blacket and his work [and] the typical parish church still found throughout Australia was entirely a nineteenth-century creation introduced to New South Wales by Edmund Blacket.⁴⁰

In 1983, Kerr produced *Edmund Thomas Blacket (1817-1883): Our Great Victorian Architect* as a catalogue (published by the National Trust) for the eponymous exhibition. What was probably intended to be a relatively modest publication became a significant book since Kerr saw 'Mr Blacket' as considerably helping her chances of wider public and academic recognition:

[I]t is at least a lot of words, even if written too rapidly and presented very cheaply so people can actually buy it. The exhibition ... is the first architectural exhibition that has been presented in this way in Australia – that is, with a scholarly and original catalogue/book and a comprehensive look at the work – although there have been, of course, numerous exhibitions in England of this sort. The *Marble Halls* catalogue was one of my major inspirations.⁴¹

The Introduction to the book begins with prose suitable for an educated lay audience – catchy and informative, not 'talking down'. It also introduces Edmund Blacket as a man slightly daunted by the variety of buildings he would be required to design: churches and domestic buildings; abattoirs and asylums; banks, barns, breweries and bridges; factories, warehouses, woolstores and chimney stacks; clubs, universities, schools and hospitals; hotels shops and theatres; furniture and furnishings, memorials, tombstones and cemetery vaults. His remark, 'I have a strange variety of matters, and I find that every single scrap of knowledge that I ever picked up anywhere is of service to me'⁴² – and Kerr's observation that 'Picking up "every single scrap of knowledge" and using it for "a strange variety of matter" was to characterize his career' – could equally apply to her own.

Kerr discovered well over a thousand drawings in the Mitchell Library in Blacket's own hand and prized these as essential keys to understanding the colonial past, not only that of Sydney and its suburbs but also that of many country towns. 'Blacket,' she wrote, 'can almost be said to have built Victorian New South Wales and he certainly was the major creator of Victorian Sydney'. It was to be regretted

⁴⁰ Joan Kerr, 'Edmund Blacket's contribution to Australian church architecture', 46. Joan Kerr's work on Blacket made a strong impression on those who worked to safeguard Australia's built-environment heritage and this article on Blacket re-appeared in 1985 in an anthology published by the National Trust: Joan Kerr, 'Edmund Blacket's church architecture', in *Australia in Trust: a Selection of the Best Writings from 'Heritage Australia'*, Australian Council of National Trusts, Sydney: William Collins Pty Ltd, 1985, 135-45.

⁴¹ Joan Kerr, letter to David Alexander, 14 January 1983. *Marble Halls: Drawings and Models for Victorian Secular Buildings*, catalogue of the exhibition of the same name held August-October 1973 at the Victoria and Albert Museum, curated by John Physick and Michael Darby.

⁴² Letter from Edmund Blacket to his brother Frank in London, 22 December 1849, quoted in Joan Kerr, *Edmund Thomas Blacket (1817-1883): Our Great Victorian Architect*, 5.

that Blacket's vision of England in Sydney had largely disappeared and could now only be re-created through photographs and designs.

The publication of Morton Herman's book *The Blackets* in 1963 meant that the Blacket archive could be revised and corrected although Kerr was critical of aspects of Herman's scholarship. Herman's 'greatest flaw', Kerr believed, was to have recreated his subject in his own image, something Kerr considered 'all biographers tend to do', admitting that her new interpretation was probably 'no exception' – as the 'picking up every single scrap of knowledge' remark indicates. Herman's Blacket – 'a Georgian gentleman fighting a polite rear-guard battle against the hideousness of Victorian ornamentation, although occasionally succumbing to its blandishments' – was, Kerr argued, 'the creation of a modernist architect fond of purity and proportion and therefore unsupportable within a proper analysis of all Blacket's work'.

Writing in the 1980s, a generation after Herman, Kerr saw a growing 'enthusiasm for Victorian architecture' as something that enabled her to give a 'more balanced understanding of Blacket's role'. Kerr believed Blacket was 'quite up to date – a cumulative rather than a progressive architect' – one who did not abandon a style just because England no longer found it fashionable. Since so much of Blacket's work had been destroyed Kerr welcomed the opportunity to expand the record and preserve Blacket's oeuvre. She intended the book as a guide for anyone wishing to make a 'Blacket pilgrimage'. Her call for notification of errors and omissions was a feature of Pevsner's scholarly practice and not surprisingly, Kerr dedicated 'this modest colonial descendant to him'.

Into the ring

In 1980, Joan Kerr was offered a probationary lectureship in Fine Arts at Sydney University, to commence in 1981. This was to herald in the major phase of her academic career. Although her teaching and research were to turn towards the history of Australian art she continued to write articles about architecture.

She began her article 'Making it new: historic architecture and its recent literature', with definitions for adaptation, restoration, reconstruction and preservation as compiled by the International Council on Monuments and Sites Australia (ICOMOS), 'since,' she insisted, 'defining what one is doing is a promising step towards knowing why one is doing it'.⁴³ Kerr's principal credo for restoration was that 'a building should look old when it is old' and she roundly criticized what she saw as a boom in opportunistic architectural restoration practice in Australia.

This 'boom' was allied to an increase in heritage publications, both scholarly and popular. Kerr had moderate praise for *Australian Pioneer Technology – Sites and*

⁴³ Kerr, 'Making it new: historic architecture and its recent literature', *Meanjin*, No.3, 1980, 364-73. ICOMOS Guidelines to the Burra Charter conservation policy of November 1999.

*Relics*⁴⁴ because the authors' aim to recreate the total environment of nineteenth-century industrial development in Australia was a 'laudable one' and anything about such neglected material would have been worth publishing since 'minerals, machinery and maltings [were] as vital to the fabric of our past as grand houses or cathedrals'.⁴⁵ She was however critical of the 'heritage' books published by the National Trust because of the absence of plans, diagrams and comparative or technical architectural analyses on the grounds that they would put off the general reader. 'Too many of the chapters in these books', Kerr wrote, 'have always tended to be a summary of the history of the place, with unrelated pretty pictures'.

Kerr also criticized *Australian Colonial Architecture* by Philip Cox and Clive Lucas, principally because of the book's concentration on so-called 'vernacular' architecture, a categorisation Kerr considered more fashionable than accurate.⁴⁶ She was concerned that Cox and Lucas, and to an even greater degree less knowledgeable architects, were being 'seduced' by the presumed original buildings 'to the detriment of the extant'. The problem of restoration to a set date, and of which new work should be removed to reveal the old, needed careful consideration and Kerr could not condone 'ripping out all the window frames of an 1820s building because they date from the 1880s and installing one's hypothesis of the original windows'.⁴⁷

'Re-animation' was Kerr's preferred option – as in Lucas' restoration work at Elizabeth Bay House in Sydney, Clarendon in Tasmania and Hannibal Hume's cottage at Cooma – rather than either 'rebuilding' or that lamentable 'architectural penchant for destroying the continuous history of a building in the quest for the building as it was, or even as it might have been'. For Kerr, a fundamental problem with restoration architects was that they could not bear to 'leave a building looking old, shabby and untidy' and she was particularly scathing about the fate of Cadman's Cottage in Sydney that had been 'submitted' to restoration in 1973: If it burned out tomorrow it would not lose a single shingle or stick of wood that predated this restoration ... If a building has all the attributes of age it ought to keep them. The restorer's job is merely to make sure it doesn't deteriorate further, and to make it safe for visitors.⁴⁸

Kerr concluded that perhaps one reason old buildings in Australia were not simply made structurally sound was that 'clients like to see something for their money'.

⁴⁴ Judy Birmingham, Ian Jack and Denis Jeans, *Australian Pioneer Technology – Sites and Relics*, Heinemann Educational Australia, 1979.

⁴⁵ Kerr, 'Making it new', 366.

⁴⁶ Philip Cox and Clive Lucas, *Australian Colonial Architecture*, Sydney: Lansdowne Books, 1978. Kerr recommended a more systematic approach to classification such as Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's *History of Building Types*, 1976.

⁴⁷ Kerr, 'Making it new', 371.

⁴⁸ Kerr, 'Making it new', 371.

In 1981 Kerr was made a member of the Architectural Advisory Panel of the National Trust of Australia. She also wrote several articles for the Australian Heritage Commission including one on Macquarie and College Streets in Sydney – the precinct that represents ‘the evolution of the public face of Australia’s oldest city ... from colonial prison to national power’ with its range of architectural styles by almost every Colonial Architect of NSW.⁴⁹ In this article Kerr sets the scene for a lively society ever on the lookout for a quick profit, as she was always on the lookout for a Gothic touch. In summarizing the precinct Kerr wrote:

School, museum, cathedral, hospital, office blocks, convict buildings and the seats of the nation’s political and legal systems are all found here. They date from almost the beginning of white settlement in Australia. A walk along these streets and through the buildings lining them shows us what local architects made of their European architectural inheritance. More importantly, they contain the institutions, which symbolized civilization to our ancestors.⁵⁰

Many times Joan Kerr unearthed plans for buildings far grander than the fledgling colony could afford and which therefore came to nothing. This neither deterred nor depressed her, as it was the *record* of these dreams and the *process* of becoming an established society that were of prime importance.

Kerr introduced an article on Norfolk Island with the obvious point that the island owes both its historical and natural significance to its isolation before beginning a discussion of the three distinct periods of permanent human settlement.⁵¹ Each left behind mementoes now valued as an irreplaceable record of a vanished era. A few traces remain of the first settlement of 1788 to 1814 and although these pre-1815 relics may not seem ‘especially impressive’, Kerr reminded her readers that they were the only equivalent of First Settlement Sydney, where virtually nothing survives. In 1856 Norfolk Island became the home of the Pitcairn Islanders, offspring of some of the *Bounty* mutineers and their Tahitian wives, but little remained of their years on the island after they were evicted in 1908. To those who have never visited Norfolk Island, Kerr’s article evokes a strange place, forever inhabited by the ghosts of convicts and islanders and the traces of the buildings in which they lived and died.

Saving the ghosts of mainland Australia had never been a priority and even after the National Trust of Australia (NSW) was established in 1945, awareness of the heritage value of Australia’s built environment was slow to gather support. In the late 1960s, when major redevelopment was planned for The Rocks area of

⁴⁹ Joan Kerr, ‘Sydney, Macquarie Street, Queen’s Square and College Street Precinct’, in *The Heritage of Australia*, Australian Heritage Commission and Macmillan Australia, vol.2, Melbourne, 1981, 95.

⁵⁰ Joan Kerr, ‘Macquarie Street, Queen’s Square and College Street Precinct’, 97.

⁵¹ Joan Kerr, ‘Norfolk Island’, *The Heritage of Australia*, Australian Heritage Commission, Melbourne: Macmillan Australia, vol.2, 1981, 227-34.

Sydney, Australians began to realize that although they did not possess those 'ancient piles' of European and British tradition, they did have a rich legacy of colonial architecture. It was worth saving and rapid action was needed to prevent it going under the developers' bulldozers. A consequence of this increasing desire to preserve Australia's early built environment was a growing conservation 'industry', which spawned a new breed of scholars – the architectural historians. Some of them had backgrounds in architecture but others who did not, challenged the right of architects to position themselves as leading experts in the field. Joan Kerr was one of these.

She was often critical of the 'too violent scrapings ... and renewings made in the furious pursuit of authenticity', especially the 1960s' approach of 'stripping down' (which usually meant tearing down) and the 1970s' fashion of 'doing up' to some approximation of a bygone age. 'Conservation should mean giving the existing fabric a renewed lease of life,' she declared, 'not destroying the past it has had for the purpose of recreating an imaginary original'.

Elizabeth Farm at Parramatta, reputedly Australia's oldest building was being restored at the time Kerr was writing this article. The roof, for example, with some of its early shingles under a second roof of galvanized iron dating from 1880, was subsequently repaired with a mix of old and new but in the final result nobody could tell the difference between originals and replicas. For Kerr this was unfortunate:

Elizabeth Farm should look like the oldest building in Australia after it has been restored. It should not look exactly as it *might* have looked to Elizabeth and John Macarthur in 1793, 1828, 1834, or any other date arbitrarily chosen.⁵²

What Kerr meant by this in practice is not easy to articulate but, like the scars and wrinkles acquired on the human body during a lifetime, she wanted a building to carry its wear, tear and weathering – evidence of the 'half inch that is gone' evoked by John Ruskin whom Kerr quoted on several occasions:

What copying can there be of surfaces that have been worn half an inch down? The whole finish of the work was in the half inch that is gone; if you attempt to restore that finish, you do it conjecturally; if you copy what is left, granting fidelity to be possible (and what care, or watchfulness, or cost can secure it?), how is the new work better than the old?⁵³

For Joan Kerr a building should retain some mystery 'of what it had been and of what it had lost; some sweetness in the gentle lines which rain and sun had

⁵² Kerr, 'Making it new', 371.

⁵³ Quoted from John Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), in Kerr, 'Making it new', 373.

wrought'.⁵⁴ Overzealous restoration would create nothing but 'brute hardness' leaving little room for subtlety – and memory.

Over a decade later in her address at the opening of the exhibition *Sisters and Spinsters: the Misses Swann of Elizabeth Farm*, Kerr was 'especially thankful' to Elizabeth Swann and her nine daughters for what, at first glance, seemed negative gestures: *not* demolishing Elizabeth Farm, *not* selling it for development, *not* wrecking the Macarthur ruin with inappropriate additions, demolitions and reconstructions as later occurred when the NSW Public Works Department removed all traces of the Swanns in the million-dollar restoration that preceded the house's acquisition by the Historic Houses Trust.⁵⁵

Another important example of the misguided conviction that 'reconstruction is the same as preservation' occurred at Hyde Park Barracks where 'every shred of evidence relating to the life of the barracks as district courts' had been removed. 'For one hundred years,' Kerr said, 'those barracks were used as law courts, which seems pretty significant, yet there is nothing, not one single stick of furniture or bit of floor from then. That's all been ripped out as if it didn't exist'.⁵⁶ For Kerr the 'vandalising' of Australia's social history was as serious as the destruction of actual bricks and mortar.

In her 1984 paper, 'Why architects should not write architectural history', Kerr called for 'architectural historian' to be recognized as an independent discipline and approached the need for this through the restoration history of several well-known buildings.⁵⁷ Her first example was Philip Cox's revamping of Sydney's Fruit and Flower Markets (now part of the University of Technology, Sydney), which she described as 'a splendid example of international Post-Modernism with a distinctively Australian flavour'. Sections of the old markets had been retained and the tower isolated and enhanced in its new setting to become a major justification for both the brickwork and the decorative detailing in the contemporary design. 'The fabric of this tower,' Kerr wrote, 'is almost entirely unchanged in its upper parts but stands on a base that is all 1980s, so the new paradoxically appears to have been built before the old – a complete inversion of the historical process'.⁵⁸

It was a disappointment to Kerr that having lost their place within the general context of Edwardian market buildings, the old components of the complex had been transformed into examples of Jean Baudrillard's simulacra, acquiring a status that was neither 'original nor imaginary re-creation'. Kerr acknowledged that every architect creates a new edifice out of fragments of the past and shapes them into some sort of hierarchy, 'yet value need not be assigned according to current taste; no

⁵⁴ Quoted from John Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, in Kerr, 'Making it new', 373.

⁵⁵ Curated by Patricia Prociv and Fiona Davies at Elizabeth Farm, Parramatta, 20 September 1998.

⁵⁶ Deborah Bartlett, 'Living interview: culture with Kerr', *Vogue Living*, August 1984.

⁵⁷ Joan Kerr, 'Why architects should not write architectural history', *Architectural History Papers: Australia and New Zealand, Papers delivered at the Conference 'Architectural historians in Australia'*, Adelaide: Departments of Architecture, University of Adelaide, August 1984, 134-42.

⁵⁸ Kerr, 'Why architects should not write architectural history', 135.

hierarchy has to place the present at the top of the pyramid. Above all, the theoretical values behind such selections and omissions need not be imported'. Kerr believed that Australians should develop a more acute sense of their own history and stop judging everything against overseas models, so that buildings once seen as 'flawed emulations' could be accepted as worthy examples of a European derived but locally established heritage.⁵⁹

Kerr continued to regret that so few early nineteenth-century public and domestic buildings exist today in unaltered form. While a laudable sentiment it is also utopian in that it is virtually impossible for an old building to escape alteration, especially in Australia where renovation has become a national pastime.

Joan Kerr did not confine herself to nineteenth-century architecture however and in 1984 turned her attention to the new National Gallery of Australia in Canberra (NGA). She was highly critical of its design, especially what she called 'masterpiece rooms' that dominated the artworks displayed in them. The design of the NGA, she wrote, had as much to do with 'the desire for personal immortality on the part of the architect' as it did with aesthetic considerations.⁶⁰ Kerr took particular exception to the extensive use of chipped concrete – a fashionable process that architects Edwards, Madigan and Torzillo had employed to create the 'bush-hammered' surfaces of the High Court of Australia. For Kerr, a technique carried out by a man with a drill and involving 'thousands of hours of totally mind-destroying work' was an 'extraordinary perversion of technology' and 'too expensive a price to pay for a surface against which to hang pictures or enjoy because of its subtlety'. She likened the process to the manufacture of glass beads and quoted John Ruskin's critique of this. According to Ruskin these unnecessary objects demeaned and exhausted the men required to make them. The 'bush hammering' on the NGA and the High Court was thus a denial of Ruskin's rule that a rational society should 'never encourage the manufacture of any article not absolutely necessary'.

In 1986 Joan Kerr introduced a review of an exhibition of drawings and plans of lighthouses with references to the many 'heart-rendering tales of shipwreck, suffering and heroism' that surround lighthouses.⁶¹ 'The Age of Romanticism will never be over,' she declared, 'as long as the notion of lighthouse continues to conjure up the spectre of the last surviving lighthouse-keeper (new claimants being regularly proclaimed by the popular press in order to sustain the myth) or his brave and beautiful daughter (long dead, but eternally immortalised in purple prose and lonely marble monument)'. She described the lighthouse as a powerful, Janus-faced icon, in 'its perpetual representation of darkness and light', looking out to sea and over the

⁵⁹ Kerr, 'Why architects should not write architectural history', 136-7.

⁶⁰ Joan Kerr, 'Does art need bush-hammering? The Australian National Gallery building and its rationale – an architectural and philosophical discussion', *Artlink*, Vol.3, No.6, 1984, 7. Kerr had been interested in the new National Gallery, from its conception and had written short articles about it, for example, 'Genesis of a gallery – Part II' (NGA): *Art and Australia*, vol.16:2 (1978), 130-1.

⁶¹ Joan Kerr, Review of the exhibition, *Designing Lights: Drawings for Colonial Lighthouses 1817-1899*, *Architecture Bulletin*, 8 (August), 1986 (unpaginated), held at the S H Ervin Gallery.

land, standing in the present yet anchored in the past. Many times during her career Kerr referred to Janus, the 'god of gates, doors, doorways, beginnings and endings',⁶² to evoke a process of looking back into Australia's heritage to safeguard it for the future, firm in her belief that 'our architecture makes our history, but the reverse is equally true'.⁶³

By the mid 1980s Joan Kerr was established as an important figure, not only in the teaching of Australian art and architectural history but also in public debates about how art and architecture should be recorded and how Australia's cultural heritage should be preserved.

In 1981 she had begun compiling her magnum opus, the *Dictionary of Australian Artists: Painters, Sketchers, Photographers and Engravers to 1870*. It would involve many researchers, both academic and amateur, and take thirteen years to complete. The final work, published in 1992 by Oxford University Press, contained almost 2,500 entries.

Susan Steggall's publishing achievements include: a biography (*Alpine Beach: a family adventure*); a novel (*Forget me not*); articles on Australian artists and art history, including several on Joan Kerr. The paper presented here is an edited version of a chapter of *Joan Kerr in context: a biography*, for which she was awarded a PhD, University of New South Wales, 2010. Previous degrees: B. Art Theory, M. Art Theory (research), College of Fine Arts, University of NSW.

Manly NSW 2095 AUSTRALIA

swal1@bigpond.net.au

IMAGE: Joan Kerr, Sydney University, 1992. The photograph is in the possession of Dr Jim Kerr and was taken in Joan Kerr's office at Sydney University in 1992.

⁶² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janus_\(mythology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janus_(mythology))

⁶³ Joan Kerr, 'Why architects should not write architectural history', 141.