

ORIGINS OF QHI/PHAQ WHENCE COMES PHAQ?

By W. Ross Johnston, Ph.D., MPHA.

Foolishly, three years ago I offered to do some research into the origins of the Queensland Historians Institute, the predecessor of the Professional Historians Association (Queensland). I was prompted to do so when the Governor of Queensland Ms Penelope Wensley, in opening the national conference of the professional historians associations of Australia in Brisbane, claimed that the Koala Club was the originator of the organisation.

I felt sure this was not true. Unfortunately I allowed time to elapse – but my conscience has now pricked me sufficiently to try to sort out our beginnings.

What follows is my impression on how the QHI came into being, from a variety of sources. Neville Buch extracted vital documents from PHAQ's archives; with the help of Paul Sayer we ransacked the Brisbane History Group archives; and I talked to a number of informants who were around at the beginning: Brian Crozier, Helen Gregory, Jennifer Harrison, David Hilliard, Ruth Kerr, Judith McKay, Paul Sayer. Brian not only provided oral evidence, but also a paper he published in the *AHA bulletin*. I will not associate a particular person with a particular detail. I am pleased to say that these various accounts roughly coincide with my own memory of what happened back then but detail and colour has been added to my understanding. Unfortunately, my written records got carried away by the Great Brisbane Flood of 2011.

Origins come from the south. In 1978 The History Trust of South Australia was established, called at first the Constitutional Museum Trust. This body was concerned with the administration of museums, and more broadly the promotion of an understanding of South Australia's history. There then arose in South Australia in 1980 the Association of Professional Historians, mainly through the efforts of Dr Brian Dickey (Flinders University) and Peter Donovan, then a freelance professional historian. This body was concerned with promoting historical work outside the universities – the stuff of professional historians. In a sense it was a trade union, aiming to promote the work of qualified historians and to maximise pay and conditions.

The next step came in Victoria in 1981, with the creation of the History Institute, launched in 1982. Brian Crozier was involved in this. It was conceived as a coordinating and liaison group, at a time when employment conditions in universities were contracting. It wanted to extend to a broad representation of interested historians - professional, non-academic, the broader public.

In 1984 a group of historians in Sydney (some academic, some not) established the Professional Historians Association, to promote professional interests. In Western Australia the Professional Historians and Researchers Association started in 1989.

The Queensland Historians Institute was next. Let the following be a lesson unto the wisdom (the necessity as well as the desirability) of keeping good records - for

History's sake. Thanks to the collecting instincts of Dr. Rod Fisher, who understood from his Tudor History background, the value of minutes and minutes-taking, ledgers and accounts, the creation of committees (with sub-committees), there exists a fairly full record within the Brisbane History Group archives from which I have divined the following account on 'whence comes the Professional Historians Association (Queensland)'. It was out of the efforts of some members of the Brisbane History Group that a professional organisation emerged.

On 30 October 1988 about thirty historians attended a BHG authors' afternoon at the church hall of St Andrew's Anglican Church, Indooroopilly. Rod had arranged an informal gathering of eight authors of recently published books on Brisbane to talk briefly on their work. Judith McKay, one of the authors, raised the issue of professional competence in commissioned research and publication, in the light of her own practical experience. Those attending asked the BHG to sponsor a session on two matters, oral history and a professional organisation. This led to the BHG forming a Sub-Committee on Oral and Professional History.

Meanwhile, Rod had been assisting the cause of professional history in another sense through coordinating, with the help of Professor John Laverty and myself, a Master's degree concentrating on Local History. This later became a postgraduate degree in Applied (or Public) History, and he set up an Applied History Centre within the History Department.

Helen Gregory, who had been another of the authors in the 1988 meeting (having just published her history of nursing at the Royal Brisbane Hospital), had already joined as a member of the New South Wales Professional Historians Association, soon after its inception. I was often acting Head of Department and she talked to me about her involvement in these professional history matters; she had just come back from a public history conference in Melbourne, and enthusiastically promoted the idea that Queensland should form its own professional association.

This led to Helen addressing the Sub-Committee (which met for the first time on 28 February 1989 in Rod's office in the History Department, The University of Queensland) about developments in the south, and she drafted a summary of activities carried out by professional history associations. At subsequent meetings it was agreed that the BHG should sponsor a session considering the idea of a professional historians association in Queensland, based on Helen's draft.

This resulted in a general meeting being called for 11 October 1989 in the Queensland Art Gallery lecture theatre; Helen had drafted and sent out an invitation and discussion paper to forty-eight people who might be interested in the matter. She chaired the meeting – to consider forming a 'Professional Historians Association of Queensland'. Forty-five people attended.

There was vigorous discussion on which model to follow. Rod Fisher preferred the cause of a general, broad-based, inclusive body (on the Victorian model); he was taking into account the growing strength of family history groups and local historical societies and museums. Majority feeling, however, chose the professional structure. I suggested the name Queensland Historians' Association – but Institute became the

preferred nomenclature. The evening concluded with dinner in the Lyrebird Restaurant.

A working party was proposed to shepherd the creation of the body; this provisional committee later morphed into a management committee. A spate of activity ensued, with regular meetings taking place in different locales – the State Library, the Supreme Court Library, the Royal Geographical Society of Queensland, St Josephs College Gregory Terrace and frequently the History Department, the University of Queensland. Minutes exist for many of these meetings – but not all.

A second general meeting was held on 10 April 1990, at the State Library lecture theatre. Here the Queensland Historians Institute was officially formed; proceedings terminated with dinner at the Terminus Hotel.

A membership sub-committee operated (consisting of Jennifer Harrison and Gail Reekie), and a publicity sub-committee (Margaret Pullar and Mark Norton). Rod Fisher compiled a work-available register; Margaret Kowald undertook to produce a newsletter. Members of the management committee (not already mentioned in origins above) included Marianne Eastgate, John Kerr (who became the first treasurer), Kay Cohen and Thom Blake. Constitutional structures had to be considered (involving Paul Sayer); there were other matters to be fashioned, such as accreditation, a code of ethics, degrees of membership (two - full, associate), rules of governance.

General meetings were scheduled about every two months – with experts giving talks on topics, such as fees, contracts and copyright, and heritage. The Australian Historical Association also held its annual meeting in Brisbane in September 1990, and the QHI provided a luncheon – ‘getting to know you’.

While the two lots of archives are fairly complete there are gaps – and sadly our memories are less complete; but let it be recorded, there were no koalas present in this genesis. Now, twenty-three years on, we are still fashioning our own history. From this simple case study you can see how important it is to keep proper records and house them appropriately. History is all around us, we need to be working at it, eternally, to fill in the lacunae in our understanding.

Postscript: The name was changed from Queensland Historians Institute Inc to Professional Historians Association (Queensland) pursuant to a Rule passed at the AGM, 18 April 2000.

W. Ross Johnston, 30 December 2012

[You may be critical that I have not provided adequate referencing for the above information. My excuse: this started out as an impressionistic exercise, to be a free-flowing essay. Increasingly I got sucked into the written record to get a more complete picture – the nature of all historical research. Evidence for the above comes from BHG Minute Books (and papers), the PHAQ archives (currently in the care of the National Trust of Queensland), and oral information from the interviewees listed above. I have not given specific (sub-)committee meeting dates, but I can verify the information].