

YARRA BIRRARUNG

Artists, Writers and the River

Dr Judith Buckrich

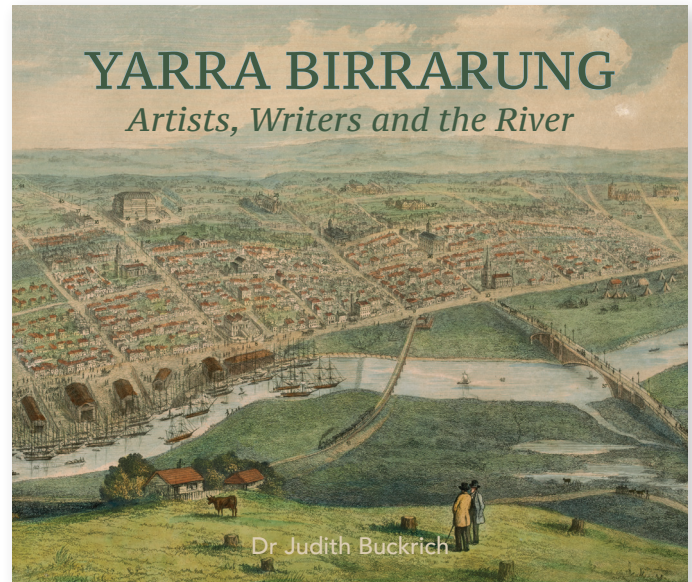
Yarra Birrarung: Artists, Writers and the River is an illustrated history of life on the Yarra. Through the lens of artists and writers, the book explores how life has flourished on the river, including recreation, industry and land use, as well as infrastructure, natural history and social history.

Despite much despoiling, our river remains the vital artery of the city and beyond to the Yarra Ranges. Just as it was the fulcrum of Wurundjeri life, it continues to inspire and fulfil our lives. From the Heidelberg School to the MCG, the river has been a centre of Australian arts and culture for decades.

This book is the first comprehensive illustrated history of the Yarra Birrarung from before European settlement to the present day, a 200 year story, examined through the lives of its creatives.

The Author

Dr Judith Buckrich was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1950 and emigrated to Melbourne in 1958. She has several entries in the Encyclopedia of Melbourne and *Remembering Melbourne 1850–1960*. Her book *The Village of Ripponlea* won a Victorian Community History Award in 2016 and *Acland Street: the Grand Lady of St Kilda* won the 2018 Fellowship of Australian Writers (VIC) Award for non-fiction. She has also published with Melbourne Books before, releasing *The Long and Perilous Journey: A History of Port Melbourne* in 2002. At present, she is working on an illustrated history of Fitzroy North.



Judith has written her own one-woman shows, short stories, feature articles and essays and worked as a curator, editor and translator. She was Chair of the PEN International Women Writers' Committee from 2003 to 2009 and President of the Melbourne PEN Centre from 1993 to 2005. She is a past President of the Prahran Mechanics Institute Victorian History Library.

Sample spreads from *Yarra Birrarung*

INTRODUCTION

This book is the story of our complex relationship with the river and surrounding country. Despite often being unaware of it, the river is our life blood. As well as providing us with water, food and places to live and work, it is a place of dreaming, creation and recreation. As it has been for thousands of years for the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation.

Since European colonisation almost 200 years ago it has endured changes in its course and depth and even in its very nature. Much of its landscape has been altered beyond recognition and its use by humans has been varied and often destructive. Yet we remain utterly dependent on it. I have tried in this work to embrace the complexity of our life on and around the river. Only landing briefly on any aspect, I have followed its course and use as well as its magic and beauty. Each chapter is a brief outline of an aspect of our life on the river. Hopefully the whole makes a story enabling us to better appreciate it.

Our way of life in the 21st century is part of an international network where many ideas, lifestyles and activities are shared with millions of others. Yet we are as much a part of our surroundings as any people have ever been. It is inescapable. In recent years we have come to recognise this and tried to ground ourselves by understanding our habitation.

There have always been people protesting the despoiling of our river and during the last fifty years many groups have been trying to restore some of its natural beauty and stop further degradation. The Yarra Riverkeepers, to whom this book is dedicated, now provide us with a powerful organisation to improve our understanding and life on the rivers.

An encampment of Aboriginal Australians on the banks of the Yarra Painting: John Cotton, c.1845. State Library of Victoria

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From the 1920s, Eltham and Warrandyte provided a bush retreat for artists and writers who often commuted to Melbourne for day jobs and other activities. Eltham Railway Station had opened in 1902, providing access to the city. Warrandyte had unsealed but reasonable roads.

WOMEN

In Australia, most women got the vote in 1902 (not Aboriginal women) and after World War I took up jobs in factories, as shop assistants, in offices etc. During the 1920s, women's clothes changed dramatically, skirts shrunk to knee length. Corsets went out, though many women still wore 'foundation garments'. The new freedom of movement was a great improvement, as was the freedom to drive cars, run businesses, become involved in sports and many other activities they had previously been denied. In Melbourne, women's clubs were established and bookshops and libraries thrived under the patronage of women who had been educated; who enjoyed exploring aspects of life made more available to them with the invention of radio and cinema, as well as the speed of information through newspapers and magazines. Women were still at the mercy of their bodies as far as sexual freedom was concerned, but they were no longer as vulnerable to disease and death in childbirth. Antiseptics and better medical care in general enabled women to have more confidence in their futures.

WOMEN ARTISTS IN THE CITY

Among the artists painting the river in the city at this time was **Clarice Beckett** (1887–1933). She was and remains a unique creator of images charged with air – people, lights, bridges, water – each painting like a breath. She did not receive the acclaim that was due her until forty years after her early death in 1935. During her working life she was appallingly treated by

critics who seemed determined to destroy her as an artist.

Born at Casterton, Victoria, Beckett studied drawing in Ballarat. In 1914 she attended the National Gallery School, studying under Frederick McCubbin and then Max Meldrum. In 1919, her parents moved to the seaside suburb of Beaumaris. She looked after her parents, who were in poor health. Her life was constrained but she managed to produce hundreds of paintings and held solo exhibitions at the Athenaeum and Meldrum Galleries in every year between 1923 and 1933, as well as participating in more than thirty group exhibitions in her lifetime. Looking after her parents exhausted her. In 1935, a year after mother's death and a year before her father's, she developed pneumonia after painting in a storm at the beach and died at age forty-eight.

Her sister and father held a major posthumous exhibition of her work at the Athenaeum in 1936. More than 2000 of her paintings were left in an open sided hay shed in Benalla in north-eastern Victoria for forty years and most were so badly damaged that they were unsalvageable. Others in a private collection in the Western District of Victoria were burned in a bushfire. Fortunately, some work that had been sent to Montsalvat when the Beaumaris house was cleared and others in private collections have survived. No public institutions bought her work during her lifetime, but now every major Australian gallery holds examples. Several of these are of the Yarra River.

Women's lives as artists (and in general) largely depended on their economic circumstances and the attitude of their family as to what a woman should and should not do. One outstanding Melbourne artist who was able to fulfil many of her creative desires was **Jessie Constance Alicia Trill** (1881–1967). Born on 29 July, 1881 at Brighton, Victoria, educated privately and in Switzerland, her two lifetime occupations – art and travel – were fostered at an early age.



Across the Yarra Oil Painting: Clarice Beckett, 1931. National Gallery of Victoria

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HARRY HOUDINI'S DEATH-DEFYING STUNT IN THE YARRA

Harry Houdini's 1910 tour of Australia included performances at Harry Rickard's New Opera House in Bourke Street and one of his trademark escapes in front of a crowd of 20,000 off Queens Bridge into the Yarra River. At 1:30pm on February 17, a 38 degree day, he dived into the river wearing 11 kg shackles, clad in a neck to knee bright blue hurling costume. He was handcuffed with additional chains wrapped around his upper body. Members of the crowd tested the bonds and pronounced them secure. Houdini took a deep breath, jumped and disappeared from view in the brown water of the Yarra. The crowd waited anxiously. Some police attending the event launched into the river in a small boat, in case rescue was required. After about 4 minutes, Houdini broke the surface of the river, smiling in triumph. His chains were in his hand. On the river bank, he saluted the excited crowd briefly, before he was whisked back to the New Opera House, to prepare for that evening's show. His performance made Houdini the toast of Melbourne. He was a man of many parts and he displayed them on his visit including flying.¹⁷

Alan Attwood writes about Houdini's dive and his struggle with an unknown object that gets tangled in his chains in his 2024 book *Houdini Unbound*.

*The water tastes of mud and is very dark as the chains carry him down.
Harry likes to look up as he sinks. Sometimes he fancies he can make out faces watching from above, but all he sees this time is murky yellow soup and all he can hear are bubbles as he releases his breath slowly while chains drag him deeper.
...
Harry is counting.
...*

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He is on the bottom, which surprises him. The river is shallower than Rickard's promoter suggested. Harry can feel the sludge and stones under his bare toes which are as tactile as his fingertips.

*...
[As he rises] Harry sees figures above him leaning out from the bridge. But it seems that few are looking at him. The stunt has never ended like this before.
People are looking ten yards to his right, where something has appeared from out of the depths as suddenly as Harry himself.
He hears a single voice cutting through the screams.
'Christ – it's a corpse!'*

THE MELBOURNE CRICKET GROUND

On the north bank of the river between Punt Road and Batman Avenue and bound in the north by Wellington Parade is the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG), established in 1853 by the Melbourne Cricket Club (MCC), which had formed in 1838. Set on a ten-acre (four-hectare) section of the Government Paddock next to Richmond Park, the grounds were extended a further six acres (2.4 hectares) so the Richmond Cricket Club could establish another cricket ground on the eastern side of the Government Paddock (this is now the Punt Road Oval).

MELBOURNE, OLYMPIC AND AAMI PARK

On the other side of the train lines just south of the MCG are Melbourne, Olympic and AAMI Parks. Melbourne Park includes the Rod Laver and Margaret Court Arenas, home of the Australian Open tennis event held each January.



Harry Houdini about to enter the water. State Library of Victoria



Houdini's Dive from the Queens Bridge, Melbourne on 17 February. State Library of Victoria

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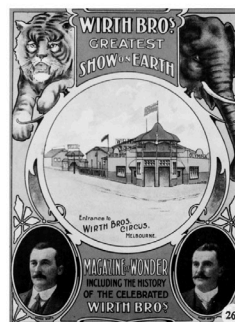
Sample spreads from *Yarra Birrarung*

Wirth's Circus, 1907–57. On the south bank riverside opposite Flinders Street Station was Wirth's Circus and the Green Mill. The circus was replaced by the Jazz Pavilion and Olympia Dancing Palace. The new park had a capacity for 30,000 customers. A number of the attractions closed during the 1930s economic depression. The dance hall, now called the 'Trocadero', remained popular. Fire destroyed almost everything in 1953. The pavilion and other animals associated with the circus were mostly rescued. Damage amounted to £70,000 and Wirths decided to relinquish their leasehold. The land was bought by the State Government for the future Arts Centre.¹

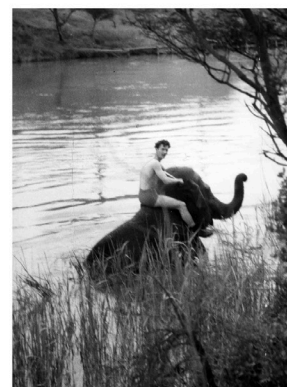


Entry to the Olympia, 1900.
State Library of Victoria

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Wirth's Circus Program Cover. State Library of Victoria



Wirth's Circus elephant with handler in the Yarra Photograph: J Cairns, 1953.
State Library of Victoria

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CHAPTER 1

THE RIVER BEFORE
EUROPEANS

Women involved in many occupations
Illustration: Henry Godfrey, 1843. State Library of Victoria

KEARNEY'S MAP AND HENRY BURN

An 1855 map of Melbourne and its suburbs compiled by James Kearney, draughtsman; engraved by David Tulloch and James D. Brown, published under the aegis of Victoria's Survey-General Andrew Clarke; shows a Melbourne intensely developed around Richmond, including the 'Survey Paddock' which became Richmond Park. The paddock had been set aside in 1836 for depasturing the Survey Department horses and oxen (the main animals of burden in the colony especially before the building of railways). The 'park' was still open country in 1869 when Henry Burn (1807–84) painted it. A few leisurely people, some cows and she-oaks and eucalypts occupy the landscape. The train steams by in the background with hazily visible buildings in the distance.¹

Henry Burn was born in Birmingham in about 1807. Research into his life in England has turned up limited information about his work, but he did travel and paint in many locations in England from 1840 to 1852. He was a competent architectural draughtsman and exhibited with the Royal Academy and Birmingham Society of Artists.² Arriving in Melbourne in 1853 on the Baltimore, he eventually married fellow passenger Susan Cane. Never able to make a decent living, despite his obvious talents, he was admitted to Melbourne Benevolent Asylum in 1877, dying there in 1884. His works depicting Melbourne and surrounds are invaluable for their detail and beauty.³



Details of 1855 Kearney Map. State Library of Victoria

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SWIMMING IN THE RIVER

In her 2010 doctoral thesis, 'Feats of Fancy' and 'Marvels of Muscle': A Social History of Swimming in Late Colonial Melbourne, Rachel Winterton notes:

The ritual of bathing, from which the sport of swimming would evolve, was initially a British custom by principle and as Melbourne was founded on the banks of the Yarra River, it was natural that its residents would take up bathing both as a necessity and as a pastime.¹

Men often bathed naked in the river to the outrage of public morality and in 1844 city by-laws prohibited daytime bathing within the town boundary in view of public areas. Floating baths were erected to enable private bathing. Winterton notes:

The first known river bath to have opened in Melbourne were the Melbourne Swimming Baths owned by Mr Riddle established in 1844. It was reported that on opening day, 'several hundred of the inhabitants took advantage of the spirited proprietor's liberality, as the baths combined 'a perpetual flow of water with privacy and comfort'. The cost to bathe was 6d per day in the respectable portion of the baths, and entrance to the working men's section cost 3d. Season passes were also available, with 11 charged to the middle and upper classes and 12d for the working class.²

Although bathing and swimming remained a pastime it waned in popularity close to the city as the river became polluted, though there were children swimming at Richmond near Herring Island in the 1940s and 1950s.³ During the 1880s, male painters of the Heidelberg School often swam at Box Hill and Heidelberg. At Alphington a riverside pool was created in the 1920s.



Women from military forces diving into the Yarra during World War Two. Australian War Memorial

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