

PROFESSOR GEOFF BOLTON "FORTY YEARS ON"

On 18 May 1994 Geoff Bolton, Professor of History at Edith Cowan University (WA), spoke to the Society. Professor Bolton has also held positions at University of Queensland and at UWA where, in 1953, he wrote his Masters thesis on the History of the Kimberley Pastoral Industry since 1885. His frequent publications since then include a contribution to a new book entitled *Being White Fella*.

In opening his talk, Professor Bolton remarked that his interest in the Kimberley began with a statue as, while waiting to catch a tram on many occasions, he stood under the statue of the celebrated explorer Alexander Forrest's well known landmark in Perth city. The story of Forrest inspired him and eventually he wrote his biography.

For his Masters research, Professor Alexander allowed him 100 pounds only and he was to carry out his own field work! So he took the train as far as Meekatharra, the end of the line, and cadged lifts on trucks to Marble Bar and Port Hedland. Flying to Broome was a luxury and here he met Mary Durack. Her famous father, M.P. Durack had died at 85 and left his excellent diaries covering the history of the pastoral industry and settlement of the Kimberley. These formed the core for his thesis.

Four facts became evident to him during his research in the area:

- * If you were genuine, and not just an idle university student, many doors opened and an informal networking became important.
- * It was a fortunate time to be in the Kimberley since there was an overlap between two distinct eras, the days of traditional droving as opposed to the introduction of the road train.
- * Oral history wasn't yet in vogue; the Aboriginals were still living the good life in the north, and simplifications re class and race had yet to be modified.
- * Unexpected treasures were still being discovered in the way of historical archives, e.g. the old records of the MacDonald family on Fossil Downs, which proved so useful.

Professor Bolton was 21 at this time and he camped out with the old drovers to get the feel of things and drink in the atmosphere. It was a period of hope, this post-war era, when more and more young pastoralists were being trained in agriculture. And 1952 saw the introduction of the hardier Brahman-cross cattle. They were actually first imported in 1911, but were not accepted until 40 years later.

People realised there could be diversification, e.g. 1951 saw the rice-growing experiment at Camballin by Kim Durack, and that this could enrich the pastoral industry. There were improvements for Aboriginal people: in living standards, sanitation, schooling, and so on.

In the 1990s there are very few of the original pastoral families left on Kimberley land. Their leases are being bought by syndicates and foreign investors. Professor Bolton was last in the Kimberley in 1992 at a conference. On his retirement, he intends to write a book on the whole of the northern area of Australia including the Northern Territory and Queensland. We look forward with interest to this production.

Daphne Choules Edinger