

Jane Elizabeth, Site-specific art installation by Penny Malone and Mary Scott
Oak Lodge, Richmond, 18 March to 18 April 2017

The exhibition, *Jane Elizabeth* arose from the 2011 Ten Days on the Island exhibition, *Trust*, which I curated and included photographs by Dr Ruth Frost presented within Oak Lodge, Richmond, Tasmania. During the research for Ruth's project, information emerged about the life of Oak Lodge's first mistress, Jane Elizabeth Booth, prior to purchase of the house in 1843 with her husband, James Richard Booth, who relocated his family to Hobart from New South Wales to take up the position of Magistrate with the Richmond Court. Interestingly, the four Booths were likely the house's first resident family. Prior to the 2011 discoveries, relatively little was known of the Booths beyond James' Navy background, legal position and relationship to Charles O'Hara Booth, his brother and then Commandant at Port Arthur Penal Colony.

By 2011, significant records had been digitised and made available on Trove, a government funded web-repository of public and other records. Key to Oak Lodge, was Kirsten McKenzie's 2004 book, *Scandal in the Colonies*, which was amongst the newly digitised publications available to web browsers. It includes a chapter on an 1831-33 scandal in Cape Colony, South Africa that involved Jane Elizabeth Wylde who ten years later, as Mrs James Booth owned Oak Lodge, which they named Basing Lodge.

Over the intervening years, more and more documents were digitised and uploaded to Trove, making accessible information about the Wylde and Booths. Such was the significance of the emerging story that the Coal River Valley Historical Society asked me to consider a follow-up site-specific art project with artists.

The thrust of McKenzie's book was that Jane Elizabeth was a pawn in a nasty rumour and innuendo-based claim that she was pregnant by her father. It seems that the motivation for the scandal-mongering was to distract and discredit her father, Sir John Wylde, Chief Justice, and South Africa's Governor, Sir Lowry Cole. Cole was charged with implementing anti-slavery legislation and Wylde with punishing those who breeched associated laws that would impact the livelihoods of colonial farmers, industrialists and businessmen. The colony and individual fortunes had been built and were dependent on free labour – just as Van Diemen's Land depended on the free labour of convicts.

Despite almost three-years duration, parlour and drawing room chatter, numerous newspaper articles and a formal British Government requested inquiry into the scandal, nothing entered the permanent record from Jane's perspective. The father's, government's and media opinions were available to all, but the impact on Jane is unknown. But there are some clues – a few images and facts suggest a woman of privilege, a reputation smeared, and social status stalled. And following the inquiry which made no finding against father or daughter, Jane was readmitted to society, married, had children and travelled extensively. An impression of a resilient and optimistic woman can be deduced.

This exhibition seeks to give Jane a voice nearly 190 years after the events which must have coloured her reputation and shaped her character. It is hard to imagine that remnants and

echoes of the scandal, then only a decade old, did not follow Jane and James to Richmond, especially knowing the Colony's appetite for news, even old news.

Artists Penny Malone and Mary Scott have collaborated with me as curator to make and present an art installation that evokes aspects of Jane's story that resonated with them in today's cultural and social contexts. Initial discussion centred on ideas of how experiences and memories stay with one throughout life – how they impact and influence attitudes, personality and subsequent events. Themes that interested Penny, Mary and I include the place of women in society, mobility – of people and news, social media – as a form of communication and bullying, and cheap labour – slavery and convict.

Creative strategies formed around a sense of place – how the lives of a house's occupants become embedded or woven into its fabric, how houses can have a vibe – give a feeling of those who've lived in them; how walls can talk. This might be evident from design and construction decisions, soft furnishings that remain, and wallpaper choices that can be revealed through careful peeling back. A common such reference can be found in many homes as children's growth is charted on walls as measurement records discretely hidden and later discovered.

Providing further creative stimulus, Sir John Wylde made the perplexing decision, in the midst of the scandal, to remove his daughter from social contact and her take to a guesthouse away from Cape Town, for several months. The decision fuelled suspicion that the rumours were true and that the family's absence related to the alleged pregnancy. During the scandal period, they were visited by an amateur artist Sir Charles D' Olyly, who made three drawings, that appear to be of the Wylde's. Curiously, only one of the drawings remains intact with its title – one drawing is complete but is missing a carefully excised title, and the other has the title but the drawing carefully cut out. The drawings are held by the South African Archives. The exhibition team used this strange aspect of the Jane Elizabeth story as a provocation – the drawings suggest an affluent and genteel family and provide a visual reference for the work made by Penny and Mary.

With the cruel treatment of Jane Elizabeth and her silence in its face, the artists created artworks that draw on aspects of the accounts in Kirsten McKenzie's book and the Cape's newspapers to build the exhibition's structure: 'a little bird told me' – twittering gossips, provide the introductory sound elements to the installation, which occupies the front garden, three rooms of Oak Lodge and the home's entry hall. The notion that Jane Elizabeth was the subject of drawing room and parlour chatter, talked about but not spoken to, is a recurring feature of the exhibition, along with references to class, respectability and affluence.

Approaching the house viewers encounter the five-part project's first element, a sound piece installed in the two Oak Trees that frame the entrance and give the house its current name. The concept of tweeting birds, and chatter is established. Moving into the house, the first room dedicated to the installation is the most public room of the house, the drawing room. With elements that suggest chatter and gossip, repeating references to birds; connoting a lifestyle constrained by rules: etiquette and protocol, every item in the room seeks to establish an image of the young woman, the subject of scandal – however she is

absent – spoken of but not spoken to. Decorative objects, the stern-faced man in the portrait, books and embroidery samplers all give clues to the story – to Jane Elizabeth. The centrepiece of the room is intriguing – more object than furniture – cushions, generous and inviting – suffocating – piled high onto a pink Queen Anne-legged stool (or table) topped with a fuchsia-pink carousel-like box – a container that emits twittering bird sounds, perhaps a caged nightingale, entwined with harp and flute. It sets up the exhibition’s themes. The table legs suggest a period of time well before now – antique and feminine. The carousel walls are taken from the two remaining D’ Oly drawings, one made at the guesthouse and the other at the Wylde’s Cape Town home, Hopeville. The guesthouse drawing presents a stylish, obviously affluent couple walking to the house being greeted by a host, with various symbols of status within the picture frame. The second, from Hopeville, is an interior scene revealing four people engaging in polite activities in a drawing room or parlour – playing harp and flute, embroidery, reading. On the Oak Lodge drawing room wall is a large hanging print – recalling traditional embroidered samplers – but in this example the text ‘Idle gossip amongst ladies’ directly addresses the scandal, as do the four bird-like sculptures, ‘Gossip Girls’, on mantle and desk. Further reinforcing the gossip theme, the room’s curtains have silhouettes, common images in the mid-nineteenth century; profile heads facing each other, suggesting conversation.

Returning to the entry hall, the exhibition continues utilising the newly installed wallpaper, discovered and replicated by Alan Townsend. The earliest wallpaper found in the entry hall and stairwell, it is presumed to have been installed by Jane and James – especially as it is similar to that installed by James’ brother in the Commandant’s House at Port Arthur. Gothic Revival in style, the motif images – building arches, plant references, and bold browns and a bright sky blue suggest strength, resilience and optimism. Penny and Mary have hung a second sampler print – this one leading visitors upstairs to the fourth and fifth elements of the exhibition. The print recalls South Africa, with red protea and yellow and green leucadendra contrasting with the wallpaper and with text: “Once at large the rumours were at liberty to spread throughout the Imperial Network” – reminding the viewer that colonial news moved efficiently, if not quickly to the far reaches of the Empire.

At the top of the stairs is a box room – a small lightly toned space, white additions to the brown timber, is set up to suggest some more of Jane’s plight. Curtains suggest purity as they continue the chattering references, a drawing contrasts indicators of wealth with the slaves that created it, another cushion and more poignant text: “I was never questioned by any party” and melted candle wax evokes a sense of threatened or diminished status.

The final room – another more private space has elements that take the viewer even further into Jane’s world. From the doorway, a mirror opposite introduces an oddly situated staircase – that hits a wall – an obstructed or stalled elevation. The risers serve as drawers filled with lady’s gloves – day and evening – symbols of status and respectability. A ceiling rose oddly hung on the opposite wall reminds us of their popularity in United Kingdom and Australian houses of a certain age, and of their absence in Oak Lodge. The rose, and therefore the ceiling rose derives from Roman times when a rose suspended over a table indicated that everything said would be held secret (sub-rosa) – starkly contrasting with the gossip that amplified Jane’s supposed secret. More samplers in a cabinet imagine text that Jane might have stitched. Toile de jouy patterned curtains – blue-printed linen with charming

images of Richmond bridge and Oak Lodge's garden. Within the room, the mirror reflects the hallway outside: the bold optimistic wallpaper Jane installed, returning to the sense that despite the scandal – her cruel treatment, Jane was resilient and successful.

As the viewer leaves the final room, the world of Jane Elizabeth is left behind. The intricacies of 1840s society captured in the details of the artworks by Penny and Mary within the walls of historic Oak Lodge further reinforces the delicate nature of how a woman's identity is constructed not only by her personal nature but by the external events that surround her. Further encapsulated and revealed in this project is the patriarchal underpinnings of how one's identity is shaped by men in power. Sir John Wylde's name and reputation, and ultimately Jane Elizabeth's future life, were essentially a result of rumours and gossip spread in social circles.

Thanks to Trove and other digitisation initiatives, we now know that Jane and James left Richmond for England and another Naval commission, followed by James' appointment as Lieutenant Governor of the West Indies, where they both died of yellow fever in 1853, when Jane was only 44.

As viewers explore each of the five-part project, the gaze with which we comprehend and shape our understanding of Jane Elizabeth mirrors her own experience of the scandal that befell her.

In imagining how Jane Elizabeth's sense of self and future life were affected by the scandal that engulfed her in the 1830s, themes emerged that provide a direct link with our contemporary world. The way Jane as an innocent victim in male manoeuvring resonates with how women continue to be casualties of male power play. The treatment of women in war; unequal social standing; career opportunities; gender pay gap; sexting; and domestic violence are examples of continuing disregard.

Whilst we, as citizens of one of the wealthiest and socially equitable society's in history, struggle to accept that slavery continues, it does – follow Andrew 'Twiggy' Forest's campaign. African diamond miners, refugees and illegal immigrants, construction workers and housemaids in Hong Kong and Singapore and impoverished parents selling their children are all examples of contemporary slave trade.

Jane Elizabeth's mobility reminds us that the 19th century Empire facilitated extraordinary travel – in her short life, Jane (and James in his Naval career) travelled to the far reaches of the colonised world – they knew their world. We are not the first people to be mobilised and connected – even if ours occurs at speed and pervasiveness that conspires against criticism and genuine debate. In Jane's and our world, truth is malleable.

As contemporary societies struggle with government by tweet, fake truth, 'alternative facts', internet bullying, WikiLeaks and associated anonymity and misattribution, Jane's 1830's experience of gossip-based allegations that gathered sufficient credibility and impact to justify an official inquiry resonate palpably.

With this in mind, one might consider gossip and rumours to be harmless and negligible. But this project has shown the effects that such gossip brings to family, reputation and life. In the absence of facts and records commonly written by and about men, Jane's perspective on her mistreatment by those on opposing sides of a social and commercial debate were at once beyond her concern and made integral to it.

Today, in a more mediated ('mediatised') world, information we receive comes in all shapes and forms, from various sources: traditional and social media. When a little blue bird fills our device's screens to deliver news, even in just 140 characters, care must still be taken not to become the subject of gossip. With an online identity, and immersed in a different 'society', the effect today can be as potentially dramatic as it was for Jane nearly two centuries ago.

Noel Frankham

With research assistance from Stephenie Cahalan and Kamal Sharhriil