

Researching:

discovering the truth behind the legend

BY MARK GREENWOOD



My writing is occupied with well-known and less well-known slices of history. I draw upon folklore and legends: stories about characters, journeys, quests and challenges. I'm primarily drawn to these stories to discover the truth hidden behind the legend.

I usually come across stories by chance, or perhaps they find me? A character or setting is the initial spark that inspires me to write. During research, I may come across a photograph that teases my imagination. My inquisitive mind then starts the research process. And once I get started on that

journey, there's no stopping me. I'm determined to search for the truth, even if it takes me to other parts of the world. For example, I travelled to The Hague and Amsterdam to walk about a replica Dutch East India ship to write *Fortuyn's Ghost* or to South Shields in northeast England to find proof of a generally unknown fact for *Simpson and his Donkey*. Research enriches me in many ways.

Unravelling the story of Lasseter's treasure of gold was the catalyst for an obsession for research that has consumed me ever since. To bring *The Legend of Lasseter's Reef* to life I lived and breathed the story of Lasseter's lost treasure for over 10 years. I became obsessed: I read every single book I could find, located maps and letters from archives around the country and then travelled to the heart of Australia, to retrace Lasseter's journey. I sat in the cave where, suffering from thirst and starvation, he wrote his last farewell in his diary. For me, going to places where the actual events occurred, experiencing the setting, putting myself into the story by being there, is the most crucial stage in bringing that story to life.

Thanks to Lasseter, I'm hooked

on history. I love researching. I'm exhilarated by the smell and feel of old newspapers and antique maps. I'm compulsively drawn to foraging through rare bookshops. I'm curious about the past and have developed a passion for research. I enjoy the process that comes with discovery. Research requires that I sift through clues like a detective, analysing data and evidence. The success of a book depends on the sense of authority an author conveys. Mastering the content is as essential as mastering writing technique.

I look at the task of researching as an adventurous unveiling of facts that may have long been lost or forgotten. Research will eventually capture a setting or enhance the narrative. It will allow readers to smell the setting and see and hear the characters. For me, the ultimate purpose of research is to become so steeped in a period that, in my dreams, I can walk there undetected. If I've researched my subject well enough I may get close enough to read the expression in a character's eyes or hear the tone in their voice.

In the genre that I work in I have the advantage of working with an illustrator (my wife Frané Lessac).



Dutch East India ship Amsterdam & South Shields England.



Portrait of Lasseter.

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Frané's book jacket illustrations.

Picture books allow us to 'colour in' the facts, to give readers a sense of atmosphere and excitement about people and events in bygone eras. This visual literacy carries a substantial part of the historical interpretation. Background details, without being mentioned in the text, invite speculation and discussion, which contribute to a reader's feel for time and place.

I am a patient but persistent researcher; I enjoy the hunt. I love to fossick for sources of information and never give up. I leave no stone unturned in my search and the ghosts of the past that I dig up live with me forever. Sometimes tenacious research can take 10 years, as was the case for *The Legend of Lasseter's Reef*. Characters I see in my 'mind's eye' aren't created with the snap of a finger. They develop over many hours, days, weeks, months or sometimes years spent together.

Giving life to a story and a character is one of the most rewarding parts of being a writer. It is also the most difficult. Researching the character and the setting, where historical events actually occurred, is like being taken on a long journey. These journeys of discovery help me to balance creative interpretation with historical authenticity ... whether it is to the island of angry ghosts on a search for shipwreck treasure, to discover the remains of a bushranger's horse

traps, or to get a sense of the depth of feeling one has when walking on the hallowed beach at Gallipoli.

The goal of research isn't just to gather documents and collect information. These are only the raw materials, not history itself. It is not an exact science. There is so much we don't know. Often the most detailed research leads a writer to draw conclusions and make objective interpretations. The stories that are written using the raw materials have to be compelling in their own right and then they need to be accurate and authentic. The goal is to tell a gripping story. What happened and why? What were the consequences and why should we care about them?

In my research, I use original documents as my 'primary sources'. These are the building blocks and my 'secondary sources' are the writings of others who have interpreted the past. I'm not the first person to be interested in my subjects. Usually I find a chain of people have shared my curiosity. Identifying the most important sources is a key part of research. Once I've done that, I want to figure out my own ideas and arguments and relate them to what the most knowledgeable authors have said about the subject. The craving, joy and exhilaration of unearthing fresh evidence, the discovery of an unknown fact, is what pushes me to search for the truth.

I'm interested in the truth, but also in understanding. My book *Simpson and His Donkey* overlooked John Simpson Kirkpatrick's less favourable attributes, such as the fact that he was not averse to a drunken brawl. Or that he volunteered in the army to get a free ticket home to England and at training camp he displayed none of the qualities of a good soldier. He was



The lounge room floor.

unsuited to army discipline, shirked drills and disregarded orders and was reckless and independent.

However, Simpson is acknowledged as a hero because of 24 days in his short life and his reaction to the circumstances he found himself in. As a non-combatant, he faced death every day at Gallipoli with compassion and courage. He was a joke-cracking, independent spirit; he was a careless larrikin, a cheerful digger with a kind word and a friendly smile for all. My task, after my research, was to decide which details to put in and which to leave out. I had to decide what was important and what would provide young people with, not just the truth, but an understanding of what his deeds were all about. These deeds were his service to others and placing the interests of others ahead of his own. That is the understanding I hope young people take away with them when they remember his story.

To get close enough to our characters to hear the tone of their voice, we search for a 'voice': the way a character speaks, the authenticity of the language used. Their words can be found in original letters that give a flavour of the period. The way characters think, or the way others think about them, can invite readers into a character's emotions. Sometimes we find that voice in the thoughts found in letters, including some, like Simpson's mother's

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Simpson in Shrapnel Valley.

unanswered letter to her son at Gallipoli. Characters come to life when they are motivated by a goal. A story develops when we find out where a journey takes them and what challenges they might face.

I live in a city surrounded by what was once regarded as the birthstain of a convict past. However, it is through these convict stories that we get an understanding of challenges, daring, wit and opportunism. We read of the ability to keep your nerve, the courage to endure when everything is against you. We discover, whether standing in the dock or facing the lash, that laughter, in the form of cheek, became a convict's defence. Humour, laced with bravado, a self-deprecating, defining Australian characteristic and the ability to laugh at ourselves — these are qualities familiar to the character of Australian soldiers. This passport of acceptance into our society was the 'spark' that drew me to *The Legend of Moondyne Joe*.

To get to know characters through research is like excavating an archaeological site. You need to brush away layers of time. To reconstruct the life and times of a character requires patience and the right tools. But without imagination, passion and enthusiasm, even a well-documented story can leave readers cold. Writing needs to be accurate, but research details should not just be tacked on for effect.

Using a primary source, the surviving remnants of the past, such as a diary or letters, has immediacy and language, in particular the slang expressions and phrases people used in everyday life. Researching secondary sources written after the fact involves an examination and interpretation of all the evidence that exists, including documents, books, newspapers and so on. But evidence can exist in anything that contains traces of the past: a photograph, a map, an artefact, a memory, a landscape.

Artefacts intrigue me. They generate interest and forge a link with the past: a nugget of gold, a relic of war, a shipwreck coin, a green silk sash. Artefacts connect me to history. Who processed them? How were those people affected by these artefacts? Some artefacts are steeped in legend, each with a tale to tell. They open up a window to the past. Artefacts with colourful backgrounds inspire me to undertake my own voyages of discovery. My most recent book began by seeing a remarkable green silk sash.

The good researcher will search for evidence in whatever form, analyse it, corroborate it and interpret it in a way that has some importance for the present. Researching means collecting fragments of evidence and figuring out what they mean.

These are some of my research tools:

- Local library
- State library
- National library
- Inter-library loan programs
- Reference books
- Biographies
- Footnotes
- Bibliographies
- Microfilm
- Contemporary publications
- Special collections



Artefacts.

- Letters, diaries, maps, photographs
- National, state and local archives
- State, government and colonial records
- Manuscripts and university theses
- Local historical societies' archives
- Works of art, photographs and original documents
- Research databases, electronic and paper card catalogues and archives
- Films and plays
- Interviews and oral histories
- Historical sites
- Museums
- New, used and rare bookstores

But the most powerful tool for finding information ever created is the Internet. Through it, the writer can make connections to organisations and institutions, research sources and publications all over the world.

Using some or all of these tools is what helps me to get the detail right and makes history come alive. But beware — with all these tools it's easy to get sidetracked — doing more research than writing! Occasionally I have to remind myself not to lose sight of my goal.

This is a modified version of Mark Greenwood's presentation given at the ASLA XXI conference in Perth on Friday 2 October 2009.