

Photographic detective tells all...

Patricia McQueen, ALIA Special Interest Group for the Preservation of Library Materials

ALIA's preservation special interest group holds four meetings a year. A meeting held earlier this year concerned the conservation of photographs, a popular topic that always attracts a large and lively audience.

I thought I had the perfect reason to organise a meeting on photographs because it was one hundred years that George Goodman, Australia's first professional photographer, captured a Sydney streetscene. Unfortunately the photograph has never been located but it has always been regarded as Australia's earliest photograph and our meeting was planned to celebrate its centenary. These best laid plans were torn asunder when... in January 1995, another, even earlier photograph was uncovered at the State Library of New South Wales.

The discovery was told by Alan Davies, curator of photographs at the State Library. He was going through an extensive collection of family records, and chanced upon a photograph of Dr William Bland that predated the Goodman image.

Never missing the opportunity to tell a good story, particularly one about someone as colourful and eccentric as Dr Bland, Alan Davies divulged the methodology used to identify the picture, drawing on the expertise of other Mitchell Library staff to collaborate his findings. Then, in thirty minutes, Alan romped through the history of photography in Australia, the different photographic forms and their special preservation requirements in library collections.

Alan raised the interesting point: *what will people in fifty or one hundred years know about us, from the evidence in our photographs?* He pointed this out with examples from the State Library's extensive collection. People take photographs of the bizarre and eccentric. But what about the ordinary things we do? These snaps might prove to be as revealing of life in the later part of the twentieth century



Dr William Bland, Australia's oldest extant photograph

as are the posed portraits in some photographic exhibitions.

Postscript: If you have those photographs that Alan is interested in, please contact him at the State Library of New South Wales! ■

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