

Doug Ralph
10 July 1948 – 24 February 2015

When Doug's daughter, Lindy, rang and said that Doug had died, in the shock of it all it went through me that a mighty tree in the forest had fallen.

A tree of knowledge, a tree of wisdom, an old tree - a river red gum or a stout box - that had stood through changing generations and cultures of this town, and of this country. A tree, a man, that was as indigenous to this place as anyone can be - or at least as any white man can be - for Doug knew and loved this country; he walked it, he thought about it, he observed its changing, he loved and nurtured it. He was *of* this place and embedded in this country.

Anyone here who ever went on his Sunday morning walks will know what a revelation they were. Doug would stroll along, never in a rush, and take us into gullies to show us where ancient rivers once ran, the stony beds of these waterways now resting on the ridges above, and he'd point out where early white occupants of the land had once tried to build a well, and failed. He'd reveal stories of the rocks and undulations in the land, which we never noticed until it was pointed out to us, by Doug. He gave voice to the country, and put a story on the country, reading it like braille.

They were leisurely, delightful mornings, and once I suggested they could be organised more often, and he could charge people something to come along. His response was that to be paid money to take people into the country would only spoil it for him.

The last we met we ran into each other in Mostyn St, about a week before he died, and he had a real spring in his step. He looked well and I told him so, and he said, "I feel well", and we chatted.

Mainly about the coming commemorations of World War One, and Doug's view that we are in for a glut of nationalistic Anzackery, and that the people we ought to thank for building this nation are the people of the second half of the nineteenth century who, he said, created the most progressive nation on earth - with the achievement of the vote, the eight hour day, and later the vote for women, and many other landmarks of social justice and decency in the world.

And as we talked, about every fifteen seconds someone walking by would say hello to Doug, and he'd respond with a hello, knowing the name of everyone. They were all older locals, people I didn't know who'd been here before us newies arrived, probably people from families Doug grew up with - and that was one of the remarkable things about Doug: he was on terms with all ends of Castlemaine; with the old locals and the latte swilling blow ins.

He once invited me to go for a walk in the bush with him and the late Felix Cappy, to visit the hut of the recluse Charlie Sanger, about whom Doug wrote a book with Bernard Slattery.

I was surprised that he'd be suggesting this with Felix, Felix being quite a right wing-ish character about town, and Doug said, "Yeah, but I grew up with Felix, he just needs to be loved."

Apart from that they shared a passion for the history of this place, but most importantly, Doug had a detailed understanding of the supposed divide between the old and the new in this community, and he had no time for an 'us' and 'them' mentality.

Doug knew the old ways of this town, with memories of camping out in the bush in a woodcutter's camp with his father, and how every tree for miles around was cut down to feed foundry fires.

And he also observed how this land was regenerating; now to the stage where, he said, it was thinning out again, allowing trees to grow big once more. He was the greenie son of a woodcutter who never knocked what his father did. He accepted that those were different times.

One would have expected to see Doug at a recent talk by historian Bill Gammage about how Aborigines, with complex and subtle use of fire, had made this country into a parkland that the white graziers and their sheep just walked into. Gammage's book *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* is a revelation to us all, yet in a conversation that I recorded with Doug in 2007 there he is, talking about how the gold diggers found this land like a park. So he was onto it, on his own, just from knowing and sitting in this land, and his reading

And he had a vast knowledge of our history. On the radio he'd talk about sustainability and how in his young days the whole district *was* sustainable - how all the food was grown locally, and he knew who grew what where; and he'd smile a chagrined smile at the occasional contemporary greenie who thought that local food sustainability was a new idea.

On a regular basis Doug would come out with information about the history of this place that you only know by being born here and living a whole life here, and so many of these facts and stories you'd hear from no one else. It was all there in his mind, and not a lot of it written down I believe, and now this tree of knowledge has gone and taken many stories with him.

But he left much behind for us to remember, so write it down folks before we forget them. Some of these pieces of information, like who grew food, were important. Some were seminal.

I remember when there was that big fight over whether or not to build a pool on the Western Reserve, and I said to Doug that I didn't understand the passion for what I called a 'desultory piece of turf' and why some were calling it 'sacred ground', and Doug informed me that the great attachment to the Western Reserve was because that's where half the old townspeople lost their virginity. "I did," he said, and explained that the part of the reserve that borders Forest Creek used to be a lot bushier.

And Doug Ralph was the father of the modern Monster Meeting celebrations. Along with Robyn Annear, Doug brought the story of the Monster Meeting of 1851 to us today. He was front and centre of the first re-enactment in 1995 that was also a fair dinkum, noisy protest against the Kennett government's usurping of elected councillors with professional commissioners; he saw the link to the gold rush when the government commissioners ran a police state in this town; and for the past twenty years Doug was the soul, the spirit of this annual event that celebrates how the gold diggers of this place struck a blow for democracy, and won.

And his thinking was nuanced. He also recognised that the gold diggers wrought destruction on the land. In his research he'd find the dissenting voice of the gold rush, the fellow who wrote a poem for the newspaper decrying the digger's disregard of the Dja Dja Wurrung people. And he was amazed that all the gold that ever was found here would fit in wheelbarrow – not that the wheelbarrow could stand the weight.

He was a top researcher. On a regular basis an email would arrive from Doug with a new discovery – a song from the gold rush, an account of another Monster Meeting after the first big one, or a mention of the Monster Meeting in an obscure newspaper from 1946.

And these emails would be perfunctory, most often without any hello at all, just simply a link, and when you clicked through you'd find out what it was. The stuff he used to find was amazing, and Marjorie Theobald, a seriously good historian, once said that if she could pay a researcher it would be Doug Ralph.

When Lindy rang with the news that he'd died she said that Doug's wish was that he be buried inside a tree on his property. Now that's an image to contemplate.

It would have to be a large tree, with a substantial opening in its trunk – something like the shape that's cut out for an Aboriginal canoe. And to get him in there Doug would have to be curled up somewhat, back resting against the internal core of the tree, the light filtering in to illuminate his bushy face and that boyish smile. Resting.

And maybe in this womb, as he returned to the soil, the trunk might close over him and hold him there, absorbing his spirit and his knowledge, and the shade and shelter around could become a meeting place, of birds, of possums and of us, with upper branches of the tree fused together in the ancient Dja Dja Wurrung fashion, to tell us that this is a gathering place.

Doug Ralph was a tree of the old stock, with the fresh sap of progressive ideas running in his veins. And that was the beauty of the man. He was what this country could be, at its best – a mix of the finest of the old and the new. Strong, progressive ideas, expressed with the modesty, even the shyness, of humble country people.

He was a tree of justice, knowledge, humility, wisdom, community, and he was always good for a laugh. In this community he's irreplaceable. And we are so lucky he was here.

Jan Wositzky
25 February 2015