



History repeats

Planning and delivering elaborate re-enactments of important moments in history has been Avalon Beach resident Dr Jonathan King's passion for more than 45 years.

Story by Rosamund Burton

Life Stories

This year Dr Jonathan King was awarded an OAM for service to Australian history. The achievements of this 79-year-old Avalon adventurer, described by Dick Smith as “an incredible Australian”, are phenomenal. He has written 30 books, made 20 documentaries on Australian history and staged numerous historical re-enactments.

Originally from Victoria, he attended Geelong Grammar and its mountain school Timbertop. He says that running the school's compulsory marathon was a life-changing moment. As he approached the finishing line the school bully muttered, “... if you pass me King I'll beat the living daylights out of you.”

“Would I beat him, because I can, even though I'm asthmatic? I went for it, and won the race for our unit.” Jonathan quotes the words of Robert Browning - “A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?” - saying that a person should strive for things, even if

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they seem to be unattainable.

He failed all his subjects at school except history, so inspired by Banjo Paterson's ballads, he spent three years as a jackaroo. Then, tiring of the droving life, he did his matriculation by correspondence.

“I sat my exams in an empty prison cell of Jerilderie police station under the watchful eye of a chain-smoking officer.”

He undertook an Arts Degree at University of Melbourne while working as a cadet journalist for *The Australian*. And experienced his first overseas adventure in 1967 when he led a group of 35 students on a three-month tour to the Soviet Union for the 50th anniversary of the Communist Revolution.

Having majored in political science, he secured a job as a television reporter on the ABC's *This Day Tonight* before heading to England to do a Masters Degree at the London School of Economics, a hotbed for left-wing radicalism. Then he landed a job as a

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producer on the BBC's current affairs programs and met his wife, Jane Lewis.

“That was a great stroke of luck. We'll have been together for 50 years in February. Pretty amazing. It shows what a wonderful, tolerant person she is.”

He had started to trace his family heritage, and they travelled to Launceston in Cornwall and found the house of his ancestor, Philip Gidley King, then discovered his burial place in South London.

“The gravestone was covered in mud. I'll never forget being so impressed by Jane. She went to a local shop, bought some scrubbing brushes, cloths and Vim, and cleaned the grave.

“In Australia we had only studied British history, but here was my ancestor, who had been a naval officer on HMS Sirius, the First Fleet flagship, and become the third Governor of NSW. I thought this is my heritage, this is my story.”

Unable to find any books about his

pittwater **life** *The Local Voice Since 1991*

forefather, Jonathan decided to write one. In the mid-1970s he returned to Australia with Jane and their baby daughter on one of the last migrant ships, following the route of the First Fleet. In Sydney, he started reading the original journals of his ancestor at the Mitchell Library. He wrote the book on Governor Philip Gidley King with his father - another history lover. When it was published Jonathan realised that there was a much bigger story to tell - that of the First Fleet.

In 1976, the United States celebrated its bicentennial with a procession of tall ships sailing into New York Harbour and around Manhattan.

"I thought we should re-enact the First Fleet's voyage for Australia's bicentennial, and I'll write a book, make a documentary and television series about it. I was just an ordinary journalist

working at the ABC, and we had two small children at the time, but this obsession would not leave me."

He spoke to leading Australian historian Professor Manning Clark who was not only supportive of the idea, but he believed that it would give Aboriginal Australians a platform for land rights. Aboriginal leader Reg Blow joined King's working committee and activist Burnum Burnum had the idea of using the First Fleet re-enactment to make a fresh start. In 1978, Jonathan and Jane launched the project on Sydney Harbour. It received huge publicity and over the next 10 years Jonathan received thousands of letters from people keen to help.

In the lead-up to 1988, A federal government bureaucracy had been formed to organise the bicentennial, but had different ideas, and thought the best way to celebrate the event was to get the

tall ships from America to sail around Sydney Harbour. King was travelling around the world looking for 11 square riggers for his fleet, and the bureaucracy did its utmost to undermine him.

"One newspaper ran a headline: 'First Fleet axed by the government', so we had to bounce back from that."

In the mid-'80s Neville Wran, the then Premier of NSW, sponsored the project to the tune of \$250,000. When Jonathan complimented him on his strong sense of history, he said the premier replied:

"We're not doing this for history, we're doing it to stick it up the Feds."

Jonathan had a position lecturing in history and politics at Melbourne University, and was doing a PhD, but the condition of the NSW sponsorship was that he base himself in Sydney.

So in 1985, Jane and he and their four

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: During the re-enactment of the Battle of Beersheba in 2017; at home with a painting of the Bicentenary celebrations; with his daughters on the harbour on Australia Day, 1988; with PM Bob Hawke; Jonathan and Jane helping Sophie Scamps' election campaign; as a jackeroo; in the former Soviet Union in 1967.



Life Stories

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daughters – Lowanna, Bryony, Mollie and Charlotte – moved to Avalon Beach.

Despite attempts to sabotage it, the project gained momentum backed by private enterprise. Channel 7 became the official broadcaster, 2GB the radio sponsor and *The Sydney Morning Herald* the official newspaper.

The 11 ships with their paying crew sailed from London to Portsmouth, where the Queen with Prince Philip reviewed the fleet and gave the order to sail to Australia. The voyage followed the route of the First Fleet, sailing to Tenerife, then Rio de Janeiro and picking up the Roaring Forties across to Cape Town then Australia. The ships stopped at Botany Bay for a week, and three members of the expedition liaised with Aboriginal groups to finalise the makarrata (a restoration agreement), which was published with an apology in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on Australia Day, 1988.

The ships sailed into Sydney Harbour to be greeted by thousands of spectator vessels and a crammed foreshore. With an estimated two to three million people this was the nation's largest ever live event.

"When I came through the Heads I saw a banner on North Head saying, 'Cherish Australia's Wilderness'. I'd spent 10 years battling to put on this big expedition and

I thought 'that sign's for me'."

He joined the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) and helped organise a summit looking at the environmental damage since the arrival of the British. In 1990, he stood as the first Greens candidate for Pittwater and founded Northern Beaches Clean Up. He is currently a representative on the ACF council, and recently campaigned for federal MP Dr Sophie Scamps in the federal election.

Bitten by the re-enactment bug, his next venture was the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's voyage from Spain to the Americas, then the centenary of the first performance of Paterson's *Waltzing Matilda*, followed by 100th anniversary of *The Man From Snowy River*.

In 2000, it was the 2000th anniversary of Mary and Joseph's donkey journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, followed by the bicentennial of Matthew Flinders's circumnavigation of Australia, which was also an environmental reporting expedition. With actor Jack Thompson, who he knew from his jackarooing days, he did a 150th anniversary of Burke and Wills' fateful expedition, again raising awareness of environmental degradation.

As the centenary of World War I approached Jonathan made three documentaries, interviewing the remaining veterans. For 10 years he

conducted tours of the battlefields in France and at Gallipoli, wrote books and made films. In 2017, aged 75 in an army uniform on a white horse riding with 100 others, he rode in a re-enactment of the charge for the centenary of the Battle of Beersheba.

He was in the middle of commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Australia Army's turning-point defeat of the Germans at Villers-Bretonneux in April 1918, which helped win World War I, but broke his ankle running around the battlefields.

"I then realised, 'mate, you're over it. [Time to] swallow your obsession with anniversaries and re-enactments.'"

Now he is writing about another ancestor, Admiral Philip Parker King, who two centuries ago spent five years finishing the charts of the Australian coastline (started by Captain Cook and Matthew Flinders) during which time he was nearly shipwrecked a dozen times.

When Jonathan received an email from the Governor-General's office saying he was being considered for an OAM, he said to Jane: "Don't tell anybody, because they might find out I was the bloke that produced that controversial First Fleet."

But he admits the award is a career highlight.

Certainly everything this extraordinary local citizen has grasped for, he has reached.

Australia Day Awards 2023

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- Young Citizen of the Year (under 25 years)
- Senior Citizen of the Year (65 years and above)
- Community Event of the Year
- Sportsperson of the Year
- Outstanding Community Service

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