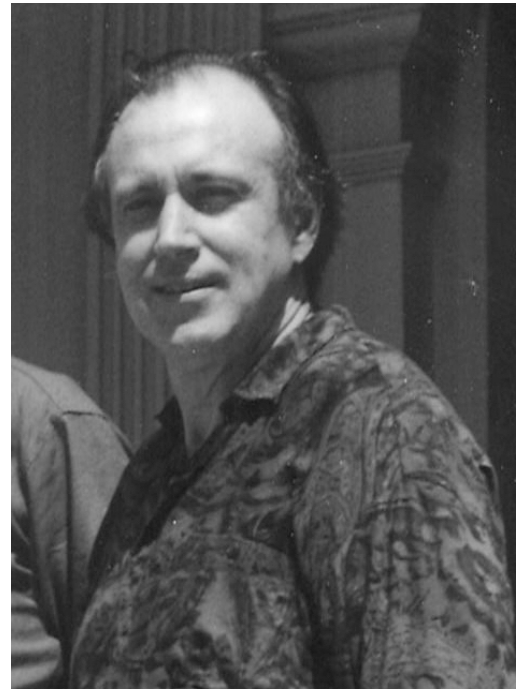


Vale Rod Fisher, 1942-2017

Barry Shaw (Brisbane History Group) writes:

On 28 June 2017 respected and influential Brisbane historian Dr Rod Fisher passed away after a short illness in Brazil. His loss will sadden all who have an interest in Brisbane's history and heritage. Over the last thirty-six years Fisher wrote and edited a veritable library of books and journal articles, he organised numerous historical/heritage tours and seminars, he taught and promoted the study of applied history at the University of Queensland and jointly founded two important Brisbane-based historical organisations.



Dr Rod Fisher, February 1996

Rodney Munro Fisher, the eldest of four children, was born in Melbourne to Enid, a former teacher, and Lance, a businessman and storekeeper who became a superintendant for the Churches of Christ. Fisher attended Melbourne University and was much inspired by the calibre of many of the history staff and being introduced to 'real' historical research. Upon graduation, Fisher taught history and physical education for a time in secondary schools in Victoria, where he was unsurprisingly nicknamed 'Hooks', and later in Alberta, Canada. After completing postgraduate studies and a master's thesis on the Elizabethan theologian, William Perkins, at the University of Saskatchewan, Fisher went to Cambridge where he was supervised in his doctoral dissertation, 'The Inns of Court and the Reformation 1530-1580', by the pre-eminent Tudor historian at that time, the late Sir Geoffrey Elton. His thesis and other research on aspects of 16th century English history resulted in a dozen articles published in learned journals, including the prestigious *Historical Journal*.

During the first semester of 1974, Fisher commenced teaching Tudor and Stuart history at the University of Queensland. Within a few years he was offering more advanced courses focusing on 16th century sources and handwriting and organised a colloquium for post graduates who met at his home. Other initiatives were the compilation of a UQ-based pre-industrial England journal featuring papers by post-graduates to be edited by Fisher and submitted to Elton and a Tudor exhibition for Brisbane to be jointly organised with the Victoria and Albert Museum. Unfortunately both projects failed to reach fruition.

These disappointments hastened Fisher's determination to look at a different aspect of history. As he explained it: 'I was drawn to local, community and applied history thanks to renovating an old shop-house in dilapidated Petrie Terrace'. From about 1980 Fisher began to immerse himself in all things Brisbane. In true Eltonian fashion, he started to compile a vast card catalogue of Brisbane people, places and subjects and amass a large collection of resource material. In 1980 he broached the subject of forming an 'all inclusive Brisbane history society' with Helen Gregory, soon to be Director, Cultural Heritage in the Queensland State

Government, and suggested that she become its first president. The first AGM of the Brisbane History Group (BHG) was duly held on 28 March 1981 with Gregory becoming president and Fisher, editor. The group's newsletter, the Brisbane Courier, was produced by Fisher and, although most of the early editions were delivered by post, to save on costs the editor rode his pushbike round town delivering newsletters.

Fisher sought to foster community interest and involvement in Brisbane's history through publications and functions. He developed BHG's ambitious publishing program and contributed numerous papers to BHG volumes but also edited and indexed most of them. He organised tours and special events. His Petrie Terrace tour attracted large numbers and resulted in the publication of the popular *Petrie-Terrace Brisbane 1858-1988. Its ups and downs*, 1988. Fisher's final BHG event in 2009, Sites of Separation, was a huge undertaking which featured a bus tour, a sesquicentennial exhibition and book launches.

In 1988-89 Fisher began to lobby for a professional association to represent historians. This resulted in the formation of the Brisbane Historians Institute, later the Professional Historians Association (Queensland).

Although still teaching 'Henry VIII and all that' at UQ, Fisher began to offer subjects in interdisciplinary, community, heritage and applied history. In 1991 he established the UQ Applied History Centre which enabled students to gain valuable experience in the field. Projects included a study of Yeronga Park for a Queensland Heritage Council conference (1994) and a regional history of South-East Queensland for the government's SEQ2001 Cultural Heritage Places Study (1995).

Fisher was also the historian on the Green Paper Heritage Consultative Committee in 1990 and in the following year was seconded to the Cultural Heritage Branch of the Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage to lead the historical research team in establishing the state register.

After retiring from the university in 2001, Fisher devoted much of his time to research and writing. Among his important contributions were *Diggles Down Under* (2003), *Boosting Brisbane* (2009), *Signs of Separation* (2009) and his trilogy, *The Best of Colonial Brisbane* (2012), *Bygone Brisbane* (2016) and *Queenslanders: Their Historic Timbered Homes* (2016).

As can be seen from the above titles, the majority of Fisher's written output has a Brisbane focus. The range of subject matter, however, was vast, from biographical studies of a brewer and artists to the comparison of oral testimonies of the Turrbal people with the historical record; and charting the histories of individual houses in many different suburbs. But this is just to scratch the surface. Fisher was a highly organised, indefatigable researcher and writer who undeniably made his mark on, and raised the profile of, the history and heritage of Brisbane.

Ross Johnston (UQ Department of History, 1969-2001) writes:

We all remember the Christ-like image that emerged in the halls of the History Department in the Forgan Smith Building in 1974. It was Rod; one colleague was heard to exclaim: 'Oh, my sainted aunt'. He was taking over the teaching of Tudor/Stuart History

and had been well tutored at Cambridge by Professor Geoffrey Elton who discovered the value of Tudor estate records. Rod soon had his dedicated students assiduously poring over Tudor wills, with the aim of reconstructing the society and thinking of the time.

Or we all remember when Rod changed direction, regionalised, and became an ardent advocate of the history of Brisbane. Not only did he put his ideas into practice, by restoring the shop-house in Wellington Street, Petrie Terrace, as his domicile but he had his followers walking the streets and suburbs of Brisbane, as we made regular Saturday heritage excursions - to Bald Hills or wherever. Rod became Mr. Brisbane History Group, with its all-day seminars, historical walks, numerous publications.

And then we remember how in the Department Rod launched another major new venture - the Local History programme, offering students (remote as well as Brisos) a well-constructed Master of Arts degree. Postgraduates swarmed in from all over - and this helped turn the ship of History around, from being a nearly sunken wreck (with a huge financial debt) to a viable unit again.

Departmental finances were also bolstered when Rod successfully applied for a grant from the Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage - to prepare a cultural heritage places study on south-east Queensland 2001. The band of postgraduate students who participated in this enterprise may not fully appreciate what a sound professional training they were being offered - when they were obliged to turn up every Wednesday morning at 8 am, at the well-resourced Applied History room that Rod had created in the Gordon Greenwood building, to proceed meticulously through his very lengthy work-agenda; we were each given weekly homework. This resulted in a very valuable reference collection (in eight volumes).

I well remember how much I enjoyed the tightly organised summer schools that Rod carefully arranged for the cohort of Applied History students that we were instructing - with professional and academic seminars interleaved with social repasts, such as a few drinks at a bar in the Conrad Hilton Hotel. This was part of Rod's desire to build up a stream of professional historians, those working and surviving outside the halls of academe. And to this purpose Rod was a vital progenitor of what is now the Professional Historians Association (Queensland) but was originally dubbed Queensland Historians Incorporated.

Let me add a negative note or two to this eulogy. Rod could be very determined - and this could result in unhappiness between him and some of his colleagues. But my biggest regret in respect of Rod is that often he had to be pushed to finish some of his major research projects, and sadly some have been left undone. Rod lived his History.