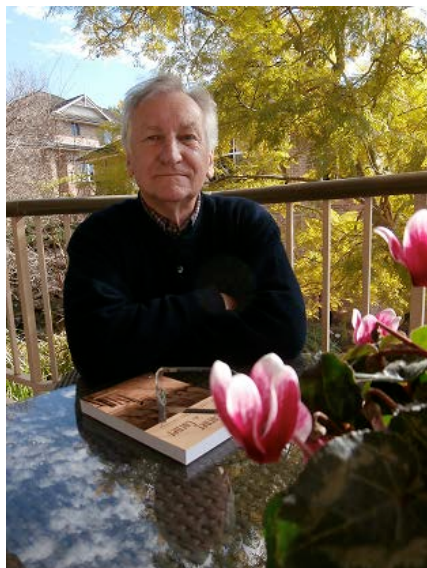




WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Serendipity: A Conversation with Adrian Mitchell

Gillian Dooley

*South Australians might still like to claim Adrian Mitchell as one of their own, despite the fact that he now lives in Sydney. An associate professor of English and now Honorary Associate of the University of Sydney, he has published many articles and co-edited several books on Australian literature and historiography. More recently, he has made an impressive contribution to Australian historical non-fiction, beginning with *Drawing the Crow* (2006), a memoir about Adelaide in the 1950s, and continuing with *Dampier's Monkey: the South Sea Voyages of William Dampier* (2010), *Plein Airs and Graces: the Life and Times of George Collingridge* (2012) and *From Corner to Corner: the Line of Henry Colless* (2015). Also published in 2015 was a novel, *The Profelist: the Notebooks of Ethan Dibble*, based on the life of English-born colonial artist Samuel Thomas Gill (1818-1880). Gill came to Adelaide in 1839, three years after its foundation. He worked as an artist in South Australia for more than a decade before heading east to the Victorian goldfields.*

*I hadn't met Adrian before September 2015 when this conversation took place. But I had read and enjoyed *Drawing the Crow* when it first appeared, and had been captivated by *The Profelist's* wry and poignant depiction of the precarious life of the colonial artist. So I contacted him through his publishers, South Australia's Wakefield Press, and he agreed to meet me when next we were in the same city at the same time. We recorded this conversation, appropriately, in the State Library of South Australia, where he has spent many hours researching the lives of his subjects.*

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GD: I've been immersing myself in your oeuvre over the last few weeks.

AM: What was that like?

GD: It's fascinating. They're such interesting people you've ... I hesitate to say dug up.

AM: Try disinterred ...

GD: So, how does it come to you? Is it all just serendipity or is there some overarching plan?

AM: Oh, I'm a huge believer in serendipity and at the same time I don't believe in it for a moment. I suppose one part of the answer would be that temperamentally I'm one of those people who are much more comfortable speaking for and on behalf of other people than about myself. (This is going to be a good evening!) But it's true, I'm more interested in other people's stories than my own. I know there are some writers who never stop writing about themselves, but I look for people whose reputation needs both defending and advancing – or maybe the other way around. And there are people who eminently suit that bill. Dampier is a case in point. The trouble is, and here is, as much as serendipity, synchronicity: as soon as you write a book you find someone else has written it too. When I had started writing the Dampier book, I was up in the Blue Mountains on Australia Day, and there was a bookshop and it had Diana Preston's book on Dampier in the window, and because it was Australia Day the bookshop was locked and I couldn't get in to see this thing. I was terrified, I was sick. No-one had thought about Dampier for years and there's a book! Then I read the first 30 pages and refused to read any more until I had finished writing mine.

GD: Of course, your Dampier book's not just a biography, by any means, it's so much more.

AM: Well yes, by playing off the documentary accounts against each other, reading the documents as an English scholar is trained to do, I was able to find out a kind of Dampier that is beyond what the historians allow themselves. How does that sound for ego! But you know what I mean.

GD: Yes, I particularly appreciated your attention to the rhetoric of the work.

AM: I felt I'd got closer to him than anyone I'd been able to read.

GD: The theme of exploration comes up also in Collingridge of course.¹

AM: I think what I like to do is find or reimagine where people have been and how that might impinge on what they've done. It's not so much the narrative as the 'where' that attracts my

¹ George Collingridge was a painter, but he also wrote extensively about the early exploration of the South Seas.

interest, and I like to write that out. That's where there's room for me to get in, if you like, as a pair of eyes.

GD: Yes, that comes out very strongly. Particularly through art, of course, with Collingridge and with Gill – or Dibble. You obviously know – have you studied art, do you practise art?

AM: No. My brother is a set designer, designs museum spaces and theatre sets, my sister-in-law was the 'bollard lady' at Geelong – I don't know if you've seen those? They're bollards all around the bay at Geelong – it's terrific.

GD: So there's art in the family.

AM: I'm not trained to say a lot about art, but I suppose with Gill – Dibble I'd better call him – I was fascinated by how much he says in his art. You can read his art. It's not about responding visually, he's conceptual.

GD: Yes, it's a kind of narrative. Actually, we've just bought his *Australian Sketchbook* (1865) for Flinders University Library's Special Collections, and I put it beside George French Angas's *South Australia Illustrated* (1847) and I could see exactly what you meant. Gill's just full of life. There's always someone doing something, whereas in Angas they're just standing there.

AM: Sunday afternoon painting. I mean, Angas is no slouch. He's very good at drawing shells. My case rests.

GD: Obviously the thing about this book (*The Profelist*) is that you're inhabiting him, you're getting into his skin, and that's what I loved so much about it.

AM: I'm trying to give him a voice. There is so little of his writing; there's very little in the public record, anyway. A few early diaries and things like that. You don't get much sense of a voice. There is one bit which is accessible, when Gill writes his account for the newspaper of Horrocks's death, and it's disappointing. I didn't want Gill to be so grey. He's not a writer. He's a colourful painter – the colour is there.

GD: It's not his language.

AM: That's right. His decency comes through, there's no question about that. I just like people who've got a bit of a twinkle in the back of their mind.

GD: Why did you decide to make this a novel rather than a non-fiction account like the others?

AM: Almost to the point of submitting it to Wakefield it was 'will I, won't I, will I, won't I?'. We were having this conversation about which way do I go. The uncertainty was partly

because Michael [Bollen]² had said he didn't like historical fiction. I thought, 'Oh! Now what do I do about that?' But on the other hand I wanted the opportunity to build in things like the presence of Lola Montez. I don't know whether Gill actually encountered her or had anything to do with her. I do know that a Mrs Gill played the piano for one of her performances – my one discovery, I think – and likewise I don't really know how involved he was with George Coppin. But they're two fantastic characters. You'd be mad to miss out on the bringing them all together. And that was part of the joy of reading all about him. What liveliness there is in Australian colonial history! And just to bring that together ... And as soon as you start to make them converge you've got to acknowledge that you're manipulating and it's not pure history.

The other way I was thinking about this was, I was not exactly sure how involved George French Angas was with the Government House set – quite a lot, as I'm discovering, because I'm reading William Cawthorne's diaries and I've seen just how privileged Angas was, which is what you'd expect. But I was making some of that up – or giving it inflections, I should say, rather than making it up. That's why it has to be fiction rather than non-fiction. But there's so much stuff there that you didn't have to invent. It's wonderful.

GD: I was so entranced by this book, I just loved it. And it was that feeling that this was a real person, which is of course an illusion. We can't know how accurate it is.

AM: Yes, how can you know those sort of things? You never do.

GD: But it's nevertheless based on something – on your research.

AM: My character goes where Gill went, my character talks about the things he painted. There's guidance there.

GD: But it's the voice, that's the important thing.

AM: I needed – another part of the fictionalising – I needed to eliminate some things so that it didn't get too involved. I simplified all the English background enormously. In fact I shifted him from Plymouth to Portsmouth. If I'd left him at Plymouth then we're rewriting Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*, we're rewriting Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* which is almost the same thing, and so I shunted him up the coast to Portsmouth, and this is an opportunity – this is where Phillip set out from, this is where all these other characters set out from ...

GD: So when you came to furnish his mind, when you came to decide what he was going to think about things, the Chinese, the Aborigines, about women – how much of it is extrapolating from the art?

² Publisher at Wakefield Press.

AM: Everything begins there. But the other thing that's happening, because you're now working with fiction rather than history, he has to grow into and through those attitudes and perhaps out the other side. And you can see – we know that he's living on a crust most of the time, but when he's living in Sydney, one of his students has drawn a picture of him, and he's portly. He's comfortable – where did that come from? He's started to become a bit sedate. That made me think about how he might be different when he's in Sydney, not just because he's in Sydney and Sydney's a different place, but he has to have grown to that point, and then why does he leave his lady friend in Woolloomooloo of all places, and head back to Melbourne. So you invent that kind of graph, I suppose, and the voice has to go along with that. The bit that – and this is where Sasha Grishin,³ very politely, disagrees enormously with my version of the account, because he says there's nothing to say that Gill died abysmally and of the kinds of diseases I'm saying quite precisely he dies of, but the account that is read in the Coroner's Court does not support Grishin's account, so it's still an open question, it's up for grabs.

GD: That's the beauty of fiction – you can go to those places ...

AM: Where I'd have had to go very very carefully if I was going to say it was factual. There's someone else who was in the back of my mind, and that's Hal Porter in *The Tilted Cross*, writing about the painter Wainwright, much the same sort of subject. He said, 'I have to call this a novel because there are two details which I have made up.' The clever move about that is that everyone was reading to find out which were the two things he made up. He got there first.

GD: You mentioned Wakefield Press. You've stayed with them.

AM: When I started writing, with *Drawing the Crow*, I tried around with a couple of publishers in Sydney and they just didn't want to know because they wanted fiction. Nobody wanted anything else. There were a couple of publishers that said they quite liked the way it was written but they couldn't see much of a market for it. So I approached Michael and he jumped at it, he was very kind. I couldn't complain about that. I don't know whether it's considered loyalty or it's just muscling in on a soft cop but I have kept going and I haven't minded that. I really like their production. They're a nice group to work with.

GD: Another thing about Gill that interested me – something that Dibble says – that he wouldn't draw cartoons. Aren't the 'Heads of People' cartoons?

AM: They're not cartoons in the Ginger Meggs sense. They're more of a Michelangelo kind of cartoon. They're very precise.

³ Professor Alexander (Sasha) Grishin of the Australian National University is an art historian. He curated the exhibition of S.T. Gill's work at the State Library of Victoria in 2015.

GD: They're caricatures, aren't they?

AM: Not quite. They're too close for comfort. They're very close to a portrait. Some of them – there's one who's got his wine cup in front of him, he gets close to a cartoon – but I think I was right in deducing that Gill didn't want to send people up. He'd comment on them, no question about that.



GD: There's satire ...

AM: There's satire, it's not quite as harsh as the general idea of a cartoon is, and he doesn't look for simplifications of that kind – famously Harold Wilson wearing a coat and his pipe, and whatever the character looked like, that was Wilson suddenly – or more recently, press cartoons with a pair of budgie-smugglers and big ears.⁴ Gill is doing something much more perceptive and requiring actually a lot more artistry.

GD: Yes, it's clear that there's a lot of artistry. And when you look at other nineteenth-century cartoons from the *Portonian* and papers of the time, they're pretty crude.

AM: Yes that's right. I thought I was explaining what I was getting at when I have Coppin respond to the image of himself [shown here] and acknowledging that Gill had actually got to something and it wasn't

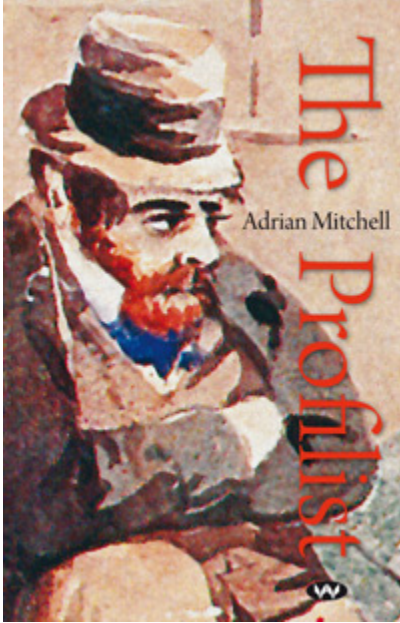
altogether comfortable, but it was honest, and he accepted that. That had to stand in for the others.

GD: The other thing I noticed about – in *Dampier's Monkey* you said that Dampier and also Locke held themselves at a distance from life. And so does this character.

AM: You touch on something that nobody else I think has winkled out of me, a view I have that it's almost by definition, par excellence *the* Australian preferred position – Bluey in the Bluey and Curly cartoons, if you like. They just comment on things. They're there, I mean they're involved in things but they're not up front, yet they're not too far away. Book after book after book – Rosemary Dobson's poem 'Bystander', Randolph Stow's *Bystander*, David

⁴ Tony Abbott, former Australian Prime Minister, was habitually depicted by cartoonists wearing a brief red swimming costume ('budgie-smugglers' in the Australian vernacular).

Malouf in *Harland's Half Acre* and famously, if you can imagine the integrated *Such is Life* then the *Rigby's Romance* part of it, people who are all oblique to things.



It's intriguing, and it allows for a line of irony which is very precisely this country's, and that was Gill, absolutely Gill. Is he in the paintings or is he not? I think you can see self-images there. The cover of that [*The Profilist*] is one of his, but when you see it, it's enigmatic, it's clever, it's wickedly lovely.

GD: In the introduction to the Dampier book, you mention Matthew Flinders. I have a bit of an interest in Flinders. You said, something you'd written about Flinders.

AM: I had written something that never got published, the beginning of a book about non-fictional prose writing in Australia. It was going to be as big as Manning Clark, probably bigger. In it I noted how Flinders let on that he had read about the first English reaction to here. I was fascinated

by the way that Flinders had written his account – he's a terrific writer.

GD: Isn't he!

AM: Marvellous! And I thought the way that he responded to Dampier was engaging, but I'd shown this essay to a friend, who then got very excited about Flinders' excitement about Dampier's push-me pull-me mediaeval animal, the bob-tailed skink, sleepy lizards as we know them, and she got me interested in thinking about the mediaeval connection that Dampier had emerged from, the last hurrah if you like of the mediaeval and at the same moment the beginning of modern science. He just straddled that transition wonderfully. That suddenly gave me a sense that Dampier was actually a much more engaging figure than someone who's drawing lines on a map, or swinging off a rope with a sword between his teeth. He has a mind – and there I go, suddenly, what's his mind like? I did play with the idea, after I'd written that, of what a fictional version of Dampier would be like, and I knew that it had to start with Dampier waking up suddenly – a banging shutter or something – and his first word would be 'What!' Dampier through and through. It's his word.

GD: Did you read the other book about Dampier in the end?

AM: Oh yes. I reckoned mine was better! I was enormously envious of the grant that the Prestons had to travel all over the world to places that Dampier had been. No, she did a good job, but it wasn't the kind of approach that I wanted. She's from a long line of people – maritime historians – who have written about where Dampier went and what he did, but not about what he was like.

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GD: Flinders, as well: he straddled the Enlightenment and the romantic.

AM: With writing, you get a licence to be a bit naughty if you want to, and take liberties with being disrespectful to characters. Someone, I can't remember who, has written a biography of Flinders and pointed out that he was impressed by people who were much bigger than he was. Anyone six feet and above was someone he had to pay attention to.

GD: Well certainly he was fascinated by Bass.

AM: And Cook, the giants of his age. But what I liked was the idea that he was so short he had to jump up and stand on the binnacle to see over the bow of his own ship.

GD: He was 5 foot 6 or 7, he wasn't that short!

AM: But that's what he in fact did, jumping up on to the binnacle to get a clear view. You could say that in a way that that was a smart thing to do, or you could just leave it at that, a standing detail, and let people relish it. Which a confession of a kind.

GD: What I did was I coedited the *Private Journal*, and it takes him through the time from when he was detained on Mauritius to his death, and so there's all this introspective stuff, it's wonderful.⁵

AM: At that stage, of course, his main mission in life has been accomplished ...

GD: He didn't think it had.

AM: No, but he was in a position to reflect back on a huge achievement.

GD: He was still looking forward. He was saying, 'I haven't finished yet.'

AM: What else was he going to do?

GD: He was going to finish the charting, he'd only got half way round.

AM: Yes, of course he had.

GD: And he was rushing back to England to get a new ship, and detained for six and a half years.

AM: The bit that [Phillip Parker] King did.

⁵ Matthew Flinders, *Private Journal 1803-1814* edited by Anthony J. Brown and Gillian Dooley (Adelaide: Friends of the State Library of SA, 2005).

GM: Yes. And then he was going to – he was thinking, would he be the governor of a new colony in the northwest of Australia if he was offered it. He had all these plans. And it's very sad. But also, the detention on Mauritius brought out this introspective – stopped him in his tracks and matured him in a way.

AM: That's what I was jumping towards. What else was there to do but think upon what is there, because he was not going anywhere just at that moment.

GD: But anyway, this is by the by.

AM: No, it's fascinating. I'll dig around and have a look at it.

GD: So, Colless. Were you working on Colless and Gill at the same time?

AM: No, the Gill had been sitting – languishing actually – in the electronic equivalent of a drawer at Wakefield Press for a year or so while publishing went through some tough times, but in the meantime Colless had been got ready. There was a personal connection there. Henry Colless was the great grandfather of my wife's brother-in-law, Lindsay Colless. We knew Lindsay very well, and he had asked whether I would like to write his family story. I think I was carefully and politely evasive, because I didn't know anything about that kind of country. I don't actually like horses that much, either! He kept trying to push this, and about 12 months after that tentative approach he was told by the doctors that he had three tumours in his brain. He had a bucket list and one of the items was the book, and the book, really, was so that he could explain to his family who he was and where he had come from. Well, I felt badly, and started having a bit of a look and suddenly thought this was a lot more interesting than thought ... he was right! The old so-and-so - he was always right.

I read lots and lots of copies of the newspapers on Trove and dug out a lot of material from there. And then, this time last year, we went up into the centre of Australia. He wanted to go to Innamincka – that was on the bucket list too. And it was fascinating – here's serendipity again. We flew into Innamincka because he was too ill to drive, and with his son I walked out to the cemetery. There were a couple of four-wheel drives and a bunch of people doing things in the cemetery. It's a very empty part of the world, and there are not a lot of weeds to have to dig out; the rabbits had got rid of those. There I met a lovely woman, Kate Buckley. It turned out this was the annual visit by the Friends of the Innamincka Reserves; they had had a grant to do deep x-ray stuff, whatever it is, into the ground, and they were finding out where graves had been that couldn't actually be identified from above ground. They had found a whole lot of these and they were trying to find out who else was buried in Innamincka. On the registry of the deaths in Innamincka the first is Burke, the second is Wills, and the third is an unnamed baby child surname of Colless, who the Collesses didn't know

about.⁶ Henry Colless had come out and started Innamincka station and he built the first permanent building – a stone building, permanent in that sense, but the next time big flood down the Cooper showed what permanence is. So that was all about discoveries and poignancy and all those sorts of things.

We were looking for where the house might have been. We went out to the present station, and quite by accident we met an Aboriginal woman who was a ranger out in that region, and she said, oh no, you're on the wrong side of the river, it's the other side of the river. When Sidney Kidman bought this property he moved the homestead across to the other side because it was better protected and a flood in 1906 or 7 or something had wiped out the old station. Once we knew which side of the river to look at – and I knew also that Henry Colless had said he could see from his front verandah where Burke had died – I knew where I was looking for then. They've actually now found remnants, bits of brick, glass, nails and stuff and – this will strike a chord close to home – they want to interest archaeology students from Flinders University to go up there and do a proper mapping of it, and that will be the next thing, and this will be something that Lindsay Colless made happen. He gets his memorial after all. He died just before the book got to him, but he'd read it in manuscript, and given it a tick. Phew.

GD: I guess there is a certain level of pressure and expectations in a job like that.

AM: Henry Colless, like Gill, had his triumphs, he made a lot of money on the Innamincka property. The cattle he brought down to the Adelaide markets were best quality and that's why Kidman got interested, it was fantastic country back then.

GD: He seemed to have a gift that some of your other characters haven't got, of being successful.

AM: But then he went back to Bourke and instead of turning into a super-pastoralist, got wiped out by the federation drought, and it was all too hard at that stage. So he ended up, not quite in a pauper's grave, but it's an unmarked one. Until the 1960s when some descendants put a memorial plaque up, and that was all wrong – they put on the wrong dates.

GD: So Henry was the one of the family that Lindsay wanted you to write about?

AM: Yes, that was Lindsay's great-grandfather. His own grandfather is the son who shot himself getting through a fence up on the soldier's settlement up in Kentucky just out of Armidale. Lindsay didn't have much time for that part of the family, he learned nothing from there. His grandmother, whom he idolised, came back down to Sydney and she didn't want

⁶ The famous and ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition left Melbourne in August 1860 to attempt to cross the continent of Australia from South to North. Both leaders of the expedition died near the homestead Henry Colless later built at Innamincka in northern South Australia.

to talk about any of that. I think her life must have been a bit hard. That would have been through the depression years.

GD: So what now?

AM: What now is returning to the 1840s and 1850s, and I'm looking, as just about everybody in town is, we're talking about synchronicity again, William Cawthorne and William Cawthorne's father, not so much William Cawthorne's son. I'm really talking about it in the context of what was going on in Adelaide. Cawthorne wanted to become respectable, because his father wasn't, and he wanted to become an Anglican clergyman but he couldn't because he had no Greek and had no means of learning Greek. He and his mother had nothing because the father had shot through. They had to work their way up from sleeping on the ground, pretty much, a dirt floor in a cottage in the city, in Morphett Street, and eventually, as people know, he became the headmaster of Pulteney Grammar. He was fairly young when he did that, he was busy trying to establish himself. There's a tension in himself about God and mammon – which way to choose – and being respectable. He started out here in his late teens and was at the stage of noticing how attractive some of the young ladies were around Adelaide, and feels the need to chastise the old Adam in himself. He becomes an interesting kind of figure I think, but really his story is the story of early Adelaide.

GD: So you're coming back to Adelaide, in your writing.

AM: It's endlessly interesting.

GD: But you're settled in Sydney?

AM: Yes. I've got brothers and a sister who live here in Adelaide, so we stay in touch, but I'm pretty much settled in Sydney. The next book that the public will see is not the Cawthorne book. It's one that Michael Bollen has already said, yep, I like this one. And it's about – have you heard of E.J. Banfield, the beachcomber, the fellow that lived on Dunk Island and wrote natural science essays? Ted Banfield? Anyway, the thing that irritated, fascinated, prompted, got under my skin, was that he called himself 'the beachcomber' and lived on Dunk Island for 26 years, but he was living there with his wife, who hardly gets a mention, and worse than that, he's got a housekeeper as well. What was this about? So I thought, what if you were to re-read Banfield from her point of view? It's to be called *The Beachcomber's Wife*.

GD: And is this fiction?

AM: Like everything I do it's on that margin, and the tension between the two fascinates me. But yes, this has to be considered fiction, though all of it is taken from his published essays. Apart from one or two things that I've added in.

GD: That sounds great. Because the thing that I'd thought, inescapably, was that these are all blokes.

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AM: Yes, point taken. But no, she's one of those feisty English women, you know, the ones that speak at a very clipped rate and are not going to tolerate fools gladly. And that's her – she's got a glint in her mind's eye, I love her. It's shorter, this one, it's a novella, only 55,000 words. There are other characters floating around that I might turn into something.

GD: There are plenty of them, aren't there?

AM: That's right. They want to trample you to death - you don't really have to go too far.

GD: And there are so many accounts of the early days. Did you ever come across Keith Borrow?

AM: No.

GD: A local historian who was the great-grandson of Boyle Travers Finniss,⁷ and he spent his life just amassing stuff about his family and about the early days in South Australia, so there's a 44-page manuscript of Finniss's early recollections of arriving, and camping on the beach and seeing Osmond Gilles, and meeting the Aborigines and all this stuff, but of course it's written 50 years later.

AM: When nobody can contradict him.

GD: Yes. But there are all sorts of outrageous stories he tells about characters.

AM: I'm aware of people who've written about early times in Victoria, much the same sort of thing – they could see the potential for colourful narratives and that's what they do. One of the people who I think must have influenced me, back in the early days of the Sunday Mail before Rupert Murdoch messed it up, they used to have a regular feature by a man called George Blakie, 'Our Strange Past'. He was actually based in Sydney, I didn't know that, I just assumed that he, like everything, was in Adelaide, but not so. He used to find all these wonderful stories and he wrote them up in terrible prose ... Some woman, 'she paced the earthen floor of her cottage restlessly, her fingers nervously twitching the blade of the knife concealed in the folds of her dress.' That sort of thing. Bring on next week! But the stories started from real things, and you think, gosh! The history that you learned at school was not like that! Terrible stuff. I wanted to find out that people get splinters in their fingers, they didn't talk about those things. It took forever to find out that people wore veils over their faces to keep out the flies. That was a bit of a surprise.

GD: Of course you don't always get that in a picture. Whenever I see a reconstruction of a voyage in an open boat or something, people in the eighteenth century, they've all got their wigs on, and I think, oh for goodness sake!

⁷ B.T. Finniss was an early colonist in South Australia. The Borrow Collection is in Special Collections at Flinders University Library.

AM: In fact their skin's falling off from sunburn and salt-burn. And poor old Sturt in the desert. We know he had a veil because he said so, but we don't see that image. He not only needed the veil for the flies but because his eyes were going. It won't do.

GD: Dibble's not too kind to Sturt. He's got his own point of view.

AM: And that's right. Sturt was hunting a governorship, just as you suggested Flinders was. Why not? But I don't think Sturt would have been much good at the job. There you go, there's a motif, let it ride. Most of the governors it seemed to me were not all that competent, and did their tour of duty and got the heck out.

GD: Sometimes you wonder how they managed to build a city.

AM: Well, I suspect that some of the modern TV sit-coms are closer to the point. It's the office manager who's actually doing the work, or the Town Clerk, they're the ones actually getting things done. There are decisions made, and that's what a governor's there for, to say this is the way it's going to be, but making mistakes and then making the wrong move in consequence of recognising a mistake - for example the goldfields licences in Victoria. I'm sure La Trobe was a nice enough man, but not very astute.

GD: It's the old story, isn't it? One other thing I wanted to discuss is the design of the books. The Collingridge for example – the chapter headers are obviously very well thought out.

AM: Yes. That really predicated itself ... It's very hard to set up a display of wood cuts, but since that was what he was initially famous for, particularly in France, why wouldn't you show what he could do? Once we decided we could run them at the beginning of each chapter, then it was just a case of finding ones that fitted more or less what was in that chapter. So that was all right. And then when I came to look at some of them they were actually releasing more information than I had at first recognised, very much as with Gill. Collingridge was a lovely old man apparently, very smart, very very quick, hugely productive. I can't believe that those characters could crank out detailed woodcuts in the time that they did, it's just astonishing. And it is interesting, I didn't make a lot of it in the Collingridge but one of his paintings of Berowra Waters, Berowra Valley, was in Margaret Preston's house when she moved up to Berowra – she moved up there after Collingridge and she had both exhibited in an exhibition in 1923 in Sydney. That's when they got to meet each other. She was sufficiently impressed by whatever it was that he was recommending that she went up there, so there's another little line of something, serendipity, synchronicity, call it what you will. Her house was built pretty much on the trail that he used as he went down the spur to get down to the wharf and take his boat across the water to where his poor wife had been stranded for two or three or four days. That was awful for her, actually.

GD: We don't know much about her, do we?

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AM: No. But being Reverend Makinson's daughter she would have been genteel. He was a clever, clever man, very highly educated, highly thought of, so she would have been brought up with expectations.

GD: Thanks so much for your time and patience tonight.

AM: And likewise Gillian. It was a pleasure talking to you, and being prompted by you.

Gillian Dooley is the co-editor of Writers in Conversation. At the time of this interview, she was the Special Collections Librarian at Flinders University, where she is also an Honorary Senior Research Fellow in English.

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