THE STORY of the Story: the story of writing *The Lost Mother*

Talk to the Annual Dinner of the Copyright Council, Sydney
15 October, 2009

I want to talk to you tonight about my new book, *The Lost Mother*, which was published in July.

Since I understand you are interested in how works are created, I thought you might like to hear how this book was created. It is rather an unusual story, with several elements that I think will be relevant to the subjects that preoccupy you.

There is the story *in* my book - several stories in fact - but there is also the story *about* my book and how it came to be. Let me explain.

Although I prefer to call myself a writer - rather than a creator - I am happy to think of my book as a creation (and I will talk in a moment of the blood, sweat and years that went into its creation).

But what makes this creation somewhat unusual is that it is based on *another* creation: a painting. Let me show you.

This is a portrait of my mother, painted in 1933 in Brighton, in Melbourne, when she was a 10 year old. The artist spotted her at Mass one Sunday morning and was evidently drawn to something about my mother's face - her eyes perhaps - and asked her if she thought her parents would agree to her having her portrait painted.

After my mother died, in 2005, the painting came to me and I decided that I would try to write a book about the history of the portrait, how it came to be painted, how my family eventually was able to acquire it, and to tell the story of the artist who painted it and the collector who initially bought it.

I soon learned that there were in fact two portraits, that the artist had also painted my mother as the Madonna so I decided that as well as trying to find out more about the one on my wall, I would also search for this other painting.

I would seek out the missing Madonna, the lost mother, and hope that if I found it, I might learn something more about my mother, through the image created by an artist more than 70 years earlier.

If she had been able to create such a compelling image of my mother in her red beret, I could only imagine what the artist had been able to do with my mother as the Virgin Mary.

So I began my book.

It was very much a journey, not in the psychobabble sense but an actual expedition into the world of art and money. It was also, in some senses, a pilgrimage as I sought meaning in the art and in the memory of my mother. It was in part an emotional odyssey as I tried to understand what had gone wrong in my relationship with my mother. But most of all it was an expedition to the heartland of research - to the libraries, the archives, the galleries, the newspapers and to the people who could help me piece together my story, either because they had expert knowledge or because, as family members or acquaintances of the many characters who soon began to inhabit my project, they were actually part of the story.

MY STORY has three central characters: my mother, the artist Constance Stokes who painted her and the mysterious and ultimately tragic Russian collector, Lydia Mortill, who bought the two portraits.

In following the story of the painting and of these three women, I encountered an astonishing array of other people.

I could hardly have foreseen that my search for a portrait that was painted in Melbourne in 1933 would involve encounters with such luminaries as Anna Pavlova, Fedor Chaliapin, the Ballets Russes, – as well as locals such as Archbishop Mannix,Nellie Melba and Dame Enid Lyons - let alone Woodrow Wilson, Hitler, Stalin and the Foreign Minister of Latvia – to name just some of those who became part of the story.

Nor could I have imagined that tracking that painting would take me from Melbourne to Moscow, Canberra to Cairo, to Paris, New York, Riga, Hawaii and even to Hollywood.   Sadly, these travels were mostly virtual rather than actual, a testament to the modern miracle of Internet-based research.

I QUICKLY learned that the painting on my wall in Sydney was called *Alice* –rather than *Girl in Red Beret* which is what my family had always thought was its title.

It was, the artist said in an interview near the end of her life, an Alice in Wonderland image and soon it had me going down all sorts of rabbit-holes into previously undreamed of wonderlands.

Once I began my investigations, I learned a great deal about the artist Constance Stokes. She had been one of Australia's leading artists in the 1940s and 50s, up there with Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan and her contemporary in the George Bell group, Russell Drysdale.

Indeed, when Stokes and Drysdale exhibited together – as they did frequently in the late 1940s and 1950s – it was Stokes's works that were the higher priced and got the most attention.

Remarkably, in 1947 Stokes's *Farmer's Family* hung alongside Drysdale's *The Drover's Wife*. The two paintings were very similar in style as well as subject-matter. Yet it is Drysdale who is credited with developing the strong red colours and the thick glazes that both artists used. Stokes's role in the evolution, perhaps even the creation, of these techniques is totally overlooked, forgotten.

Stokes had enjoyed tremendous critical and commercial success from the 1930s until the 1980s. She was collected by all the public institutions (with the exception of the AGNSW) and was revered by private collectors such as Keith Murdoch, Joseph Burke and Daryl Lindsay. People put their names down to buy her paintings and drawings.

She was admired by people like Sir Kenneth Clark who described her as one of the best draughtsman of the 20th century.

Stokes had been part of Australia's entry in the Venice Biennale in 1953, and she had been one of the painters to be included in a special exhibition, Twelve Australian Artists, in London in 1953 to mark the coronation of Queen Elizabeth 11.

So what happened to her?

Why hadn't I heard of her? Why wasn't she a household name like the male artists who hung alongside her? (All of whom, I might add, had also been knighted. She received no recognition whatsoever.)

I had not even seen her name mentioned in the context of the women artists such as Grace Cossington-Smith, Margaret Preston, Stella Bowen, Clarice Beckett and others whose reputations – and works – had been rescued in recent years, often as the result of feminist scholarship.

Why had Stokes remained lost?

THE theme of loss soon became central to my story.

Each of these women was lost in their own way.

My mother's portrait as the Madonna was lost – as was my relationship with her. Constance Stokes was very much the "lost artist", someone whose brilliant star has faded into virtual obscurity today. As for Lydia Mortill, well she lost everything.

Lydia's story is one of the extraordinary byways that I explored, not knowing where it would take me, or how relevant it would be to my search.

Lydia Alexandrovna Klaiguin was born in Orel in Russia in 1893 to a noble, landowning family. She was educated at the Stroganvosky College in Moscow where she received a gold medal for her studies in political economy. She later went to Paris where she studied music and languages.

Lydia enters my story in early 1916 when she somehow found herself in Cairo where she married a young Australian officer who had been wounded at Gallipoli – on Anzac Day!

Lydia's new husband, Captain Dudley Hardy, was sent to the Somme a few weeks after their marriage and eight months later was killed in the Battle of Pozieres. Lydia Hardy, aged 24, was alone in the world, unable to be reunited with her mother in Russia where revolution was imminent nor to return to Paris.

She got in touch with her in-laws in Australia and in 1917 made her way to Kadina, a tiny town on South Australia's Yorke Peninsula.

This desolate town must have been a great shock to the system of the tiny, vivacious and sophisticated woman who had shone in Paris and Cairo. She decided to get out Kadina as soon as she could and, according to a family member who actually knew Lydia and who I interviewed, to marry a rich man.

Within two years she had succeeded.

Lydia Hardy married William Mortill in Melbourne in 1919. She was 27, he was 51 and immensely wealthy. Before long, the Mortills were stars of Melbourne society, especially in the area of the arts. They entertained every visiting arts dignitary at their mansion, Tay Creggan, in Hawthorn (including Pavlova).

Their parties were legendary, as was their art collection. Among the many paintings Lydia bought were the two portraits of my mother. And it was at one of these parties, where a visiting French actress was photographed by the *Melbourne Herald* admiring a portrait of a young girl on the wall of the mansion, that my grandmother learned where the painting of her daughter was.

That is my story - or a good part of it. I will have to ask you to read the book if you want to know the rest of it.

I THOUGHT THAT I would spent the rest of my time this evening addressing some of the subjects that might be a little closer to your interests, such as the copyright and other knowledge ownership issues I encountered while doing this book.

There were many although none as difficult as those I had to deal with when I wrote my autobiography *Ducks on the Pond* more than ten years ago. Then, because I was writing about the 1960s and 1970s, naturally enough I wanted to write about the music that changed me.

And who wanted to charge me more than anyone? Bob Dylan of course. But when I approached the corporation that Bob Dylan is these days, he wanted $1500 to allow me to quote four lines from a song. Needless to say, he was not quoted in my book.

Elton John, on the other hand, could not have been more generous. I wanted to quote from his *Yellow Brick Road* album because it was what my 17 year old brother listened to when he was dying of cancer. John charged me just a few hundred dollars to use four lines of his song 'Beyond the Yellow Brick Road'.

I did not want to quote from songs or poems in *The Lost Mother* although I did want to reproduce some paintings and, as I am sure you are aware, the copyright on art works is a complex and evolving subject. There is no uniform approach among galleries, some of whom presume that their ownership of older works confers copyright on them, while others respect the copyright of the artist or the artist's estate.

In my case, it was essential to obtain agreement from Constance Stokes's family not just to have permission to reproduce the images I had selected, but also to be able to quote from the private papers - letters and diaries - that one of her children had allowed me to read.

I was extremely fortunate that this permission was given. There were some hiccoughs, and some very daunting potential problems within the family but I was extremely fortunate that these did not get in the way. I received not just permission, but enthusiastic permission. I can't tell you how relieved I was - because we were at page proof stage.

And it does not always go this way.

I was hard at work on a biography of Adela Pankhurst Walsh many years ago when the family abruptly withdrew permission for me to consult the huge deposit of Pankhurst Walsh papers in the National Library.

And I am sure we all remember the problems Janine Burke had with her biography of Albert Tucker. The artist's widow refused Burke permission to use any images at all of the artist's work. How can you have a full-scale biography of an artist without being able to show his work? It was a disaster for Burke. But the book was written. She had a contract. What was she to do? In the end, she had to publish using just photographs of Tucker from various periods of his life that were either in the public domain or from sources she was able to get permission from. There was not a single image of his work in the book.

I found when looking at manuscript collections for *The Lost Mother* that the copyright regime has become much stricter than it used to be. There is also a lack of consistency. Some of this is due to the conditions imposed by the depositor of the materials but the policies of the collecting institutions vary.

I consulted manuscript collections at both the State Library of Victoria and the National Library of Australia. Let me tell you a couple of stories of my experiences.

In Melbourne, I asked for the papers of Jon Hetherington who had written, among many other books, a biography of Melba. I was trying to chase down a Melba story that needed confirming. As it turned out, the information I wanted was not in Hetherington's book, nor in his papers but I had been warned by the librarian that there would be significant hurdles if I wanted to quote anything from these papers. I found this exasperating and also, frankly, pretty hypocritical. Hetherington was first and foremost a journalist - someone you would expect to agree to free flows of information.

In Canberra, I consulted the papers of Sir John Monash and Sir Keith Murdoch.

Murdoch was a Trustee, later Chair, of the National Gallery of Victoria and had significant influence over the Melbourne art world. He insisted, for instance, that the Gallery move from the site it shared with the State Library, the Museum and various other institutions to a new location on St Kilda Road what he had had the foresight to have the State government purchase. He picked the director of the Gallery and he had a key influence in acquisitions via his appointments to the administration of the Felton bequest.

I was interested in the role he had played in establishing the Chair of Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne. Murdoch had decided to mark the end of the war in the Pacific by endowing the University with this Chair, and he personally drove the selection of Joseph Burke, the inaugural occupant of the Chair. I knew that Burke had been a huge fan of Constance Stokes. In fact, he considered her to be one of Australia top six artists. So I wanted to learn as much as I could about him and how he came to be in Australia.

The correspondence in the Murdoch papers was fascinating for lots of reasons. It turned out that Burke was principal private secretary to the British Prime Minister, Clement Atlee, at the time he was recruited, in 1945. (He had been an Assistant Keeper - curator, in today's language - at the Victoria and Albert Museum before being seconded to war duty). All the correspondence from Burke to Murdoch was on Number 10 Downing Street letterhead.

I decided I wanted to photocopy Burke's resume, figuring it would be quicker and less prone to error than transcribing it myself. Not allowed, I was told. Not without permission from Burke's estate. That was not too difficult to achieve as his son lives in Melbourne and was quite agreeable to my request, but it added to the time taken to acquire a simple piece of basic factual information.

Murdoch's letters were fascinating: "I do hope you are not one of those who has closed their minds to modern art," Murdoch had written to Burke at the time of his appointment. "We have hosts of them here. I cannot get as far as abstract pictures myself, but there are far too many people out here who cannot get further than representational pictures". Rather than go through the rigmarole of seeking permission to photocopy these letters, I adopted the old-fashioned method and merely transcribed them in longhand. I decided it would be quicker.

No such issues arise with public records. I spent a lot of time trawling through military, intelligence and other on line records of the National Archives of Australia. I looked at the military records of Lydia Mortill's first husband. And I looked at those of William Mortill's first wife's three sons, all of whom went to the First World War. While I was about it, I look at my own father's records and also his father's.

The NAA digitisation of military records is a wonderful program. It is great for families and it is great for researchers but it does raise some questions about the ownership of information and the right to privacy.

Although I needed to ask Jo Burke's son for permission to photocopy his father's resume, I could rifle freely through - and print copies in the comfort of my home - the records of any man who went to war for his country.
I could see who had syphilis, who deserted, who was dishonourably discharged, who was denied promotion on the basis of character. And I was free to use this material - so long as I gave the appropriate citation, showing the information had come from the National Archives.

So while copyright protects Joseph Burke's innocuous resume, there is no comparable protection for the medical and other sensitive records of our military - a fact for which I, as a researcher, was rather grateful.

Allow me to digress as I conclude, and to say that reading the papers of the famous people whose lives are deemed worthy of preservation in our national collections is a rich and rewarding experience.

I wanted to look through Sir John Monash's papers to see if I could learn any more about Lydia Mortill who was a friend of his sister's. The Monash papers measure 35.42 metres in length, comprising 253 boxes and 37 folio packages. Fortunately, they are indexed so I contented myself with a few boxes that contained records of parties, dinners and other social events. I was hoping that perhaps Lydia Mortill had been at one of his dinners. If she was, I found no record of it. But I did find a fabulous journal from Monash's time in London towards the end of the First World War. In it, he recorded every social event he attended, and listed the other guests. Given that Monash was a great war hero, his dance card was always full and he certainly got to hang out with the top people but it seems he was insecure enough to have to write it all down. Himself.

My favourite one was a dinner. It was at Buckingham Palace and the hosts, naturally enough, were the King and the Queen. It was quite a small dinner, just three other guests: Rudyard Kipling and a Mr and Mrs Wilson. Mr and Mrs *W.* Wilson. The President of the United States and his wife.

It wasn't something I could use in my book, but I did enjoy the moment when I came across it and could imagine a man sitting in his rooms in London (with his mistress, who could not accompany him to dinners such as these) writing a record that a researcher in Canberra eighty years later would stumble across and enjoy.

Writing a book can be hard, often very, very hard but the researching is always wonderful, with moments such as these adding to the overall pleasure of discovery.

Then the book is finished. It is published and goes out into the world where it takes on a life of its own which you have just a few glimpses of, although many more in this interconnected world where readers now routinely email writers after they have finished their books. But these messages, welcome as they are, are from the past.

One book leaves you. another one picks you up. (bit like dating, really). I am still waiting to see who or what will pick me up, although there are lots of interesting prospects.