

Story Telling and Reflection: Dromkeen National Centre for Picture Book Art

By John Oldmeadow



Dromkeen National Centre for Picture Book Art

PRESS RELEASE

SCHOLASTIC AUSTRALIA, TRUSTEE OF THE DROMKEEN NATIONAL CENTRE FOR PICTURE BOOK ART, GIFTS ENTIRE COLLECTION TO THE STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA

Ken Jolly, Chairman of the Board of Scholastic Australia, has used this year's annual Dromkeen Dinner to announce that Scholastic Australia is to present the entire Dromkeen Scholastic Collection to the people of Australia through the State Library of Victoria. The Collection consists of some 7500 original artworks and illustrations from the prepublication material of many of Australia's best-loved children's books. The Collection also includes an historical book collection and six bronze sculptures of picture book characters.

Welcoming the donation of the Dromkeen Scholastic Collection, the President of the Library Board of Victoria, the Hon John Cain, said, "We are delighted to accept this important national collection. It is wonderful that it is being given to the Library during the National Year of Reading. The Library will build and exhibit the collection, support research and continue programs to engage young people in the Library and on-line. In this way we will maintain the vision of Courtney and Joyce Oldmeadow, and Scholastic as Trustee, and work to support literacy amongst young people."

Dromkeen will maintain its Exhibition and Education program at the Dromkeen Homestead in 2012 with the transfer of all parts of the Collection completed by the end of the year.

The Dromkeen Collection has progressed from a single piece of art work from an Australian children's picture book collected by Joyce and Courtney Oldmeadow in 1973 (*Barnaby and the Rocket*, illustrated by Judith Cowell and written by Lydia Pender, published Collins 1972.) to a 7,500 piece collection acknowledged as the National Centre for Picture Book Art, and is moving from the idyllic setting in a rural homestead to the high Victorian edifice of the State Library of Victoria. How shall we tell its story or seek to evaluate its performance?

In the context of the Inquiry into school libraries and teacher-librarians, there is increasing pressure to not simply tell the story but also to assess, evaluate, justify the existence of, the need for collections and those who tend them, make them accessible, and provide "an arch wherethrough gleams that untraveled world whose margins fade forever and forever when I move" (Lord Alfred Tennyson). As the Dromkeen Collection moves from private and then corporate philanthropy to an institution with government-based funding, it is an appropriate time to both tell the story and evaluate the success of the Collection after its first four decades.



Telling the story of the place, the experience of my parents, Joyce and Court Oldmeadow, and then my sister Kaye Keck's passion for Dromkeen I am in danger of sliding into a personal perspective and even hagiography so let me tell it from the perspective of Graeme Base as he relates his experiences with Dromkeen and its impact on him . . .

Dromkeen was not quite the gingerbread cottage or a moated castle of old, but something in between - a graceful nineteenth-century Australian homestead in a picturesque country setting in Riddell's Creek in outer Melbourne. Here lived the fairy godmother of Australian children's literature. Her name was Joyce Oldmeadow

*Joyce and her husband, Courtney, were living their dream, having established, in 1974, the Dromkeen Children's Literature Foundation. Housed within the Dromkeen homestead were a specialist children's bookshop, an art gallery and an ever-growing collection of original Australian children's book illustrations and manuscripts. The internationally-renowned Dromkeen was also a sanctuary for the creators of children's books. Over the years Joyce and Court welcomed authors and illustrators from all over the world into their home. They came to write or illustrate, to talk, to dine or unwind, to become inspired and to inspire. Joyce offered passionate support and sustenance to new and upcoming artists: Robyn and I were swept up into the world of Dromkeen and I knew I'd found my niche. When I accepted Joyce's invitation to be a writer-in-residence and talk to groups of children, the difference between these two strange lives, the rock-and-roll pub scene and the grace and calm of Dromkeen, was extraordinary. I adored it. I met [children's authors] Doug MacLeod, Michael Dugan, Paul Jennings and Ted Greenwood and [illustrators] Jane Tanner and Terry Denton, lovely like-minded people. I was so fortunate to have Joyce's input on *Animalia* at a critical stage. She was unfailingly gracious and welcoming . . . we often stayed over a weekend – sometimes a week! The sense of Community at Dromkeen, the conversations, the red wine and laughter, nourished [my] Graeme's spirit (Watts & Base, p.36)*

In pragmatic terms Dromkeen is a gallery (in fact, an accredited museum) preserving and displaying art work from finished illustrations through all manner of pre-publication material from children's books housed in an 1898 homestead set in 25 acres of rural countryside a 45 minute drive north of the Melbourne CBD. Associated educational programs are run for students from primary to tertiary, teacher professional development events are offered, residential workshops held and author and illustrator days opened for the general public.

The grounds contain a collection of six outdoor bronze sculptures of characters from children's books and a Heritage Trail of a dozen outdoor boards is spread throughout the property, highlighting particular Australian children's books as part of the nation's history.



The Collection is based on 7500 pieces of original art work and pre-publication sketches, notes and 'mock-up /dummies' of books. The artwork is supported by an historical collection of 19th century and early 20th century children's books and a significant reference collection. Together the collection forms a research resource for academics in a range of disciplines associated with Australian children's books their production and most importantly their art.

In addition, Dromkeen has initiated the Annual Dromkeen Medal for significant contribution to children's literature over more than 30 years and the Annual Dromkeen Librarians Award for some 15 years. (See Dromkeen web pages for listing of Award winners <www.scholastic.com.au/dromkeen>).

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The vision of Joyce and Courtney Oldmeadow in creating Dromkeen was grounded in their educational bookselling business and the homestead was both a bookshop as well as their home. As with their earlier 'shop' based in their home in the Melbourne suburb of Ivanhoe, hospitality blurred the distinction between the profitable and prophetic. The practical interweaving of business and personal passion continued through the close personal connections with Ken Jolly (then CEO and

now Chairman of Scholastic Australia). As an ex-teacher, Ken shared Court and Joyce's passion for bringing books and children together and from an early commitment to Court, Ken worked to ensure the survival and flourishing of this vision, with Joyce and then her daughter, Kaye Keck and most recently her son, John. The practical solutions included the purchase of the bookselling business and homestead by Scholastic, transfer of the trusteeship of the foundation to Scholastic and the 35 years of unstinting funding of all aspects of the Collection and the property. This extraordinary level of support demonstrates the ongoing commitment of Ken to the idea of Dromkeen.

As Ken Jolly has acknowledged, the funding by Scholastic Australia was entirely dependent on the personal belief in and commitment to Joyce and Court's vision of Richard (Dick) Robinson, Executive Chairman, CEO and son of the founder of Scholastic International in New York. Dick met with Joyce, Kaye and John on various occasions, visited Dromkeen and was kept apprised of all of the developments by Ken, and he personally ensured the corporate funding behind every step. It is unusual that personal and corporate philanthropy from the USA should ensure the preservation of a collection of such cultural, artistic and Australian literary significance. That this level of philanthropy by Dick Robinson has been maintained over more than 30 years is exceptional in any area of the arts within Australia.



If to tell the story of Dromkeen in all its parts is difficult, how might we assess its significance, its impact since 1973? There are three key areas in which Dromkeen has made a difference.

First, perhaps it is drawing a long bow, but the claim that Dromkeen raised the profile of illustrations for children's picture books from 'pictures alongside text' to an 'art in its own right' is substantiated in the emergence of the art from picture book exhibitions, the exponential rise in sale price and representation in major galleries and other institutions of picture book art. The profile of illustrators themselves now sits alongside authors and, for many picture book illustrators, their income is bolstered by the sale of art work, illustrator talks, workshops and presentations, with few illustrators actually surviving on book royalties alone. Dromkeen can rightly claim to have been a prime mover in this change in Australia.

Second, in national and international terms Dromkeen has inspired others to establish like-minded places and institutions. Perhaps the greatest tribute comes from Seven Stories (<http://www.sevenstories.org.uk/>) in the UK when upon the occasion of the presentation of the Eleanor Fargeon Award, in her 2011 Acceptance speech Kate Edwards (Chief Executive 'Seven Stories') said:

Dromkeen raised the profile of illustrations for children's picture books from 'pictures alongside text' to an 'art in its own right'

I'm going to tell you about Seven Stories and to pay tribute to our friends and founders who helped along the way. The story begins a long way away from here – thousands of miles away in fact, in Australia, in Riddell's Creek, near Melbourne.

Eleanor Farjeon Award winners Joyce and Court Oldmeadow were booksellers who dreamt of creating a permanent exhibition of preliminary and finished artwork in their bookshop, to answer the question that visiting children asked about how a book – especially picture books – came into being. Through book trade connections they had become aware of the fate of much artwork and manuscripts after publication – lost or destroyed, as were sketches, diagrams and dummies – many had left Australia for foreign collections – sound familiar?

They purchased a colonial homestead called Dromkeen in 1973. Within months they purchased the first artwork to found a collection and in 1974 officially opened the Dromkeen Collection of Australia Children's Literature. Its collection rapidly developed, as did the rooms given over to exhibitions and children, adults, authors and illustrators.

The Oldmeadows' daughter Kaye Keck took over as leader of Dromkeen in 1989, furthering Dromkeen's place as an important educational resource, nationally important archive and champion of the Australian picture book. Many of you will know that tragically Kaye died in September of pancreatic cancer.

I'd like to dedicate this Award to Kaye Keck and to Dromkeen, a pioneering place that inspired the founding of Seven Stories.

Thirdly (and most importantly) how does one assess the impact on the thousands of children, teachers, librarians, parents, families and even researchers who have entered through that arch into the untraveled world of the imagination? At Dromkeen we now hear young parents exclaim: "I came here as a school child and I want my children to be as excited as I was when I first saw the pictures behind the books I loved".



The State Library knows well the power of the art from children's books to excite and inspire: the LOOK Exhibition (<http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/look>) and the amazing success of the Children's Book Festival sponsored by the Library and the Wheeler Centre are testimony to this. The stories of the great event are told in families across the State and the Library has the statistics to confirm the results for even the most sceptical assessors!

As Ken Jolly and Dick Robinson pass the Trusteeship of the Dromkeen Collection from Scholastic to the State Library of Victoria, and the Oldmeadow family relinquishes direct and personal involvement in Joyce and Court's dream, it remains to be seen if the magic of a place, the passion of a few people and the bountiful funding from a committed individual in another country can be continued by a government funding institution, albeit it one with such an excellent record of supporting the bringing together of children and books.

References

Watts, Julie & Base, Graeme (2008) *The Art of Graeme Base*, Julie Watts & Graeme Base, Penguin Books Australia.

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