

The Prime Minister's Potato

and other essays

Anne-Marie Condé describes herself as a 'miniaturist'.



Anne-Marie Condé, with her book, *The Prime Minister's Potato and other essays*, Upswell Publishing, Perth Western Australia, 2025. Photo: Roslyn Russell

Over her thirty-year career as a curator of collections and exhibitions at national institutions such as the Australian War Memorial, the National Museum of Australia, National Archives of Australia and, currently, the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House, she has been immersed in describing and interpreting the 'big stories' of Australia, and the lives of key Australians such as C E W Bean, a founder of the Australian War Memorial. In her spare time, though, Condé prefers to explore lesser-known aspects of Australian life and society.

As she notes in the first chapter of her recent book, *The Prime Minister's Potato and other essays*, 'Obscure lives are the ones I like best.' It is an approach that has occurred naturally: she only writes about things that have a real interest for her, and she develops an intense relationship with her subjects that plays off intimacy and distance.

What has sparked her curiosity and prompted her to take a deep dive into investigating the lives of ordinary people, and the local and domestic issues that dominate their existence? Condé traces this curiosity back to her childhood at Mount Carmel College in Hobart, where she collected fragments of blue and white porcelain in the school grounds

and speculated on their origins. This led her into an investigation of the lives of the former inhabitants of the house that formed part of the school precinct, notably Clive Lord, a director of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and a well-known natural scientist.

Condé's career has included a considerable term at the Australian War Memorial. Now in this book she explores the hidden stories that do not form part of official wartime narratives: what happened when a family received a telegram telling them that their son had died in World War I? How did a small rural community in Tasmania commemorate its war dead? She traces the forms of commemoration there, from tree planting to honour boards to 'the names inlaid' on the local war memorial; and delves into the descriptor, 'returned man', favoured by Barry Humphries' quintessential suburban bore, Sandy Stone. And she circles back to the Australian War Memorial itself, and a catastrophic storm that threatened the collection in 1936, when the Memorial was under construction; to the commemoration of the centenary of Gallipoli in 2015, and, finally, the discovery of a complete archive of a dead soldier's service, now in McCrossin's Mill Museum in Uralla, New South Wales.

From this point, Condé's focus embraces a larger prospect, with essays involving

people whose names are more widely recognised: Dame Mary Gilmore; Arthur Stace, the 'Eternity' man; Charles Darwin; and prime ministers Ben Chifley and John Curtin. However familiar these names are to many Australians, Condé draws out unknown connections and explores their interactions with people whose actions would almost certainly never have seen the light of day without her forensic exploration of archival records.

The cover image for the book shows a 'crazy jumble of stuff' in a secondhand market, including a commemorative plate depicting the arrival of the First Fleet that prompts a reflection by Condé on the 1988 Bicentenary and, in a memorable phrase evokes in her 'a laugh-out loud moment for a curator on a day off' when confronted by 'a glorious freewheeling rejection of the power of professional museums to control the language of acquisition and display'.

There are many more insights into national and family history – and archives and museums – in this fascinating, and beautifully written, book. It repays careful reading to match the care and attention – and imagination – that its author has devoted to delving into archival records and museum displays and producing a rich trove of stories that illuminate a range of hidden lives in Australia.