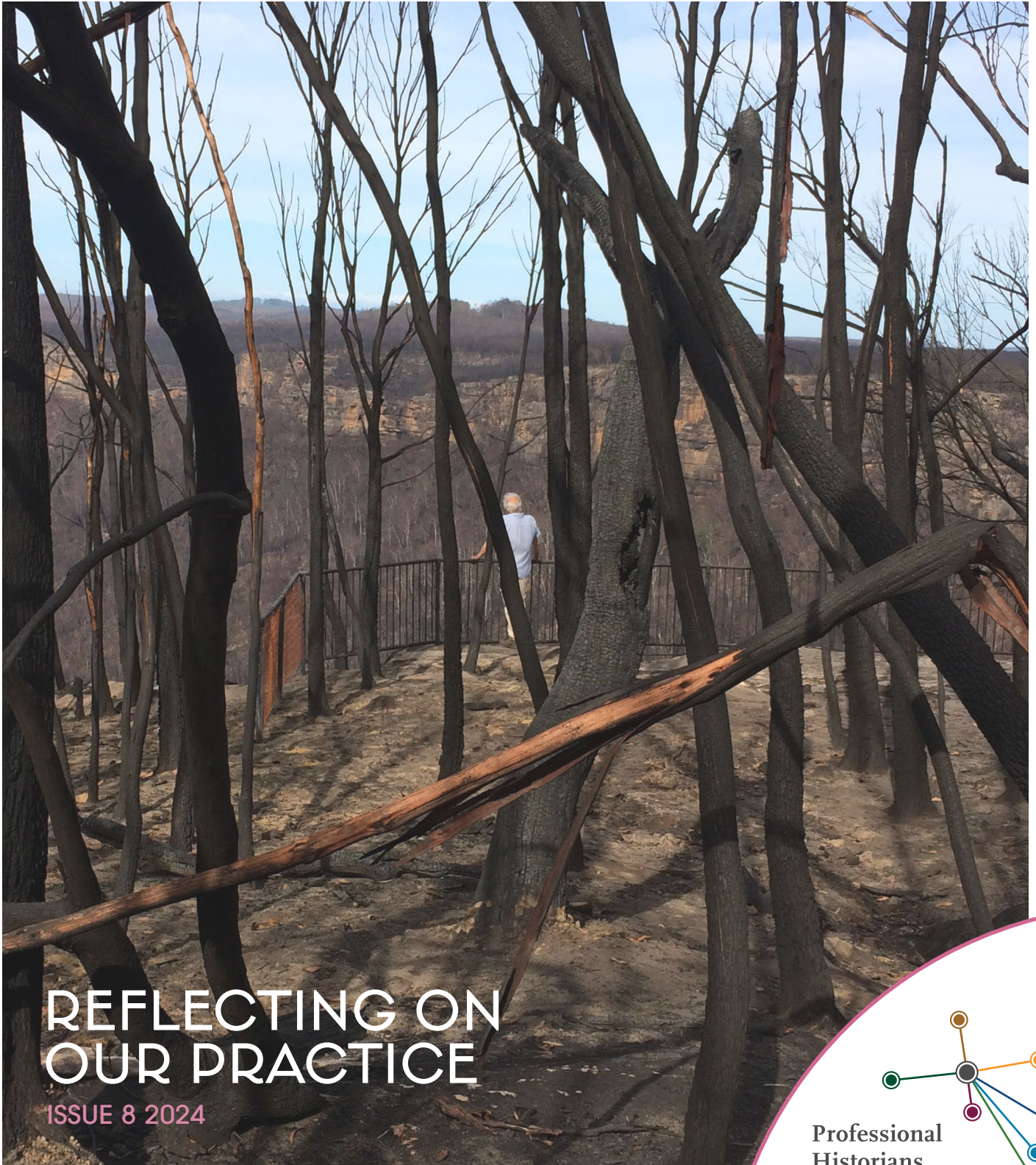


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REFLECTING ON
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REVIEWS



Cast of William Bailey's Haunted Mansion, photograph by David Waldron.

WILLIAM BAILEY'S HAUNTED MANSION

One of the primary challenges in history education revolves around capturing students' interest and establishing a connection with the past. Museum theatre – blending traditional stagecraft with historical interpretation – strives to enhance the immersive and engaging aspects of the museum experience. Concurrently, gamification is on the rise in history education, because it can leverage participant engagement and competition to foster students' interest in course content.

In my quest for diverse heritage engagement and participation events for the Ballarat Heritage Festival, I investigated roleplaying games, such as the renowned Dungeons and Dragons, as a conduit for heritage education. This led to crafting a narrative set in 1890s Ballarat, featuring authentic locations, historical figures,

events, and era-specific issues, all framed within a historical fiction context for players to explore.

The 1890s marked a unique era for Ballarat's community and is a very rich and atmospheric era for storytelling. It was a period when a town founded on mining began transitioning towards an economy centred on heavy industry and manufacturing. Despite experiencing prosperity, society became increasingly stratified, with the wealth gap widening and the threat of recession looming. Additionally, it was a time of emergence for the middle class, with a growing segment of the population seeking diversions and new ideas. These were reflected in various forms such as literature, cinema, the flourishing of Mechanics' Institutes, and educational establishments. Furthermore, the era witnessed the rise of alternative religious beliefs, such

REVIEWS

WILLIAM BAILEY'S HAUNTED MANSION (CONT.)

as spiritualism and new religious movements, which challenged traditional religious orthodoxy and gained widespread popularity.

Another conflict that shaped the community was the clash between old money, established with the squatters and early landholders, and those who made their fortunes in the gold rush, often from very humble beginnings. In Ballarat, this is perhaps most famously remembered in the story of the Learmonth/Bailey dispute. At the core of this legal battle was the claim William Bailey, acting as an agent for the wealthy and powerful squatter family, the Learmonths, fraudulently claimed the Mount Egerton Goldmine was worthless and arranged the sale of the mine to an anonymous consortium (secretly co-owned by William Bailey himself). The immense wealth of the mine catapulted Bailey to millionaire and magnate status, and was manifested in the building of the Fenshaw (Bailey's) Mansion on Drummond Street, which remains there today as part of the St John of God Hospital. The Learmonths, furious, challenged Bailey in court. This led to one of the longest-running and most dramatic legal cases in Australia's history involving claims of fraud, violence, intimidating and assaulting witnesses, and even threats of murder.

The drama and skullduggery of this tale makes for a very rich field for storytelling. Roleplaying games (RPGs) are interactive narrative experiences where participants assume fictional roles within a predetermined setting. These games often involve storytelling, decision-making, and character development. RPGs can be played in various formats, including tabletop (e.g. *Dungeons and Dragons*), video games, or live-action scenarios that promote creativity and social interaction. Recently, live performances

of RPGs, where actors perform their roles and improvise their characters and actions, have become incredibly popular. In 2023, the entertainment group, Critical Role, for example, sold out Wembley Arena in London for a live performance of *Dungeons and Dragons*.¹

In terms of their capacity to captivate young learners in history, roleplaying games do foster engagement. By immersing participants in historical environments, they go beyond passive absorption and actively contribute to historical narratives, making choices and witnessing consequences. This interactive approach deepens their understanding of history. Furthermore, these games allow players to step into the shoes of historical figures across various eras, nurturing empathy and a deeper appreciation for the perspectives and challenges faced by people in bygone times. This, in turn, promotes a nuanced comprehension of historical events.

I crafted a narrative for the 2023 Ballarat Heritage Festival, titled 'William Bailey's Haunted Mansion'. It took inspiration from the post-Bailey/Learmonth legal dispute and drew upon a rich source of newspaper articles and Public Record Office Victoria records. These documents unveiled the intriguing dynamics of the Stevenites or New Lights, a cult-like religious movement that thrived in western Victoria from the 1870s to the 1890s. The group faced allegations of predatory conduct toward its members, including targeting the bereaved and demanding the surrender of all worldly possessions to their enigmatic leader, Stephen, often referred to as the Prophet Stephen in historical records. The story also drew on the fictional milieu of the 'Cthulhu Mythos' created by gothic author HP Lovecraft, which

underpinned some of the broader designs of the cult in the fictional component of our narrative. For this reason, we used the ‘Call of Cthulhu’ rules system by Chaosium, a role-playing game company, who also supported with marketing and publishing the adventure as a commercially available book.

The story I wrote for the adventure drew on newspaper articles, plans and historical photographs to present a story that culminated in the resolution of a mystery. The collaborators were approached with the idea and initial concept and we examined ways in which they could support the project. All the participants came together with a great deal of enthusiasm. The project culminated in a performance at the Ballarat Town Hall, funded by the Ballarat Library, Chaosium Inc. and GUF Games, with music provided by *The Drongo and The Crow*. The players controlled characters based on historical figures from Ballarat such as James Curtis – prominent spiritualist; Bella Guerin – suffragist and the first woman to achieve a bachelor’s degree in Australia; and Thomas Montague – a police detective and champion of scientific policing methods. The actors, having been briefed on their characters and presented with the scenarios and results of their actions, would make decisions they felt their characters would make and engaged with each other through improvised acting. The success and failure of actions their characters took, such as investigating a clue or persuading someone to give evidence, were resolved with the ‘Call of Cthulhu’ gaming system, where players would roll percentage dice (two 10-sided dice) and see if the result was under their skill level in a given area, such as forensic medicine or persuasion. They could then discuss which rooms and

places they wished to examine for clues, talk to witnesses (played by our storyteller), or take other actions they might wish to follow.

The event itself was very successful with a sell-out audience in the Town Hall and well over 200 viewers on the livestream of the event. The performance is viewable here: <https://youtu.be/EqJlqPkrYuI>. The event was described by the Chaosium Inc. Vice President, Michael O’Brien, as:

a masterclass of showing how you can deftly concoct a Cthulhu Mythos (fictional) tale out of real historical happenings, bringing in known locations, authentic artefacts and documents, and actual people who lived at the time.

Likewise, Ballarat Library found the event uniquely able to engage the youth demographic it had struggled to attract to previous events.

The script and module for ‘William Bailey’s Haunted Mansion’, published by Chaosium, is available here in pdf, <https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/455051/William-Baileys-Haunted-Mansion>. The adventure has been taken up by the Miskatonic Playhouse in London (<https://www.miskatonicplayhouse.com/>).

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