

Debbie Kruger

Writer ► FREELANCE ► JONATHAN KING



MELBOURNE WEEKLY MAGAZINE
November 9-15, 2003

A FUTURE IN HISTORY

Former Kooyong kid Jonathan King revels in bringing Australia's past back to life

INTERVIEW with DEBBIE KRUGER

"I like telling history stories and the best way to tell them is to relive them," says Jonathan King.

A respected journalist, author and historian, King's latest book, *Gallipoli Diaries: The Anzacs' Own Story Day by Day*, has been published in time for the 85th anniversary of the end of World War I this Remembrance Day.

King lives life through re-enactments – walking, riding and sailing in the footsteps of the great heroes of the past.

"I just tell stories. I do it through books, newspaper articles, documentary films and live events. We're meeting at Phillip's Foote [a bar in Sydney's The Rocks] because it was the headquarters of the 1988 Bicentennial First Fleet of Tall Ships, which I spent 10 years organising as a story for the nation. We got 11 tall ships together and sailed them out from London to Sydney. So I'm a storyteller in any medium that comes to hand."



Australian history, says King, is exciting. "It's new, you can go back and touch the start of it. There are 11 journals from the First Fleeters who came out here. My ancestor was one of them – Governor Philip Gidley King – and he had a journal that he wrote from day one of European settlement in Australia. That's how close it is.

"It's in my blood. There's blood in these veins that was here when they got ashore on Australia Day 1788. So I'm very caught up in it."

Raised in Kooyong, King relocated to Sydney temporarily while working on the \$11 million Tall Ships project during the 1980s. He just hasn't had time yet to move home to Melbourne. After being named Australian Achiever of the Year in 1988 for his efforts to commemorate the Bicentenary, he went on to organise or participate in more re-enactments.

“I’ve just come back from Antarctica. I went down with Greg Mortimer, who is probably Australia’s greatest living hero. He was the first bloke up K2 for Australia and also the first in the world up Antarctica’s Mount Minto. He took us right down and we re-enacted Shackleton’s journey. We went down to the Weddell Sea, which is inside the Antarctic Peninsula, and we went to where Shackleton was trapped in the ice and then we just retraced how he got out. “

King was a mutineer on the Bounty for the re-enactment of Bligh’s voyage, sailed Christopher Columbus’s journey for America’s 500th anniversary, relived Marco Polo’s South China Sea voyages, celebrated the centenary of “Waltzing Matilda” in Winton, Queensland and rode with 50 horsemen and women in the Snowy Mountains above Corryong to honour the 100th anniversary of the Man from Snowy River.

Amid all that activity, King has been immersed over the last decade in bringing back to life, most faithfully, the ANZAC legend.

“One of the best things I’ve done in my life is to interview the last 10 Gallipoli diggers. I fell in love with them – totally, madly, deeply. They were just such gentle old giants that they brought a 1915 breath of fresh air from Australia back in. It was just captivating.”

First King wrote a book about the last ANZAC who died in 2002, Gallipoli: Our Last Man Standing, the Extraordinary Life of Alec Campbell. Then he put the word out that he was seeking first-hand written material from the war campaign that many believe defined Australia’s character.

Gallipoli Diaries is “a tribute to 8,709 Australian kids who were killed at Gallipoli, and the New Zealanders and the Brits. They believed in what they were doing and they were so innocent. Painfully innocent. And so keen to show that they would do whatever they could for Australia, this 14 year-old nation.”

Wading through the diaries and letters from the soldiers brought King many surprises and many tears. The organisation of the material in a day-by-day format was like living through the campaign. He was re-enacting it.

“After I wrote the book I’d wake up at night with shell shock. I woke up one night and I said to my wife, ‘Look out, there’s a shell that’s just landed in our bunker, in our trench.’ And she said, ‘But we’re in a bed.’ I thought it was about to explode and I wanted to get away from it. It got into my head. Think about it – reading diary and letter, diary and letter. And I’d get back to my computer, and I’d say, ‘I’m back, boys. Let’s get into it.’ I was among them in the trenches...

“It was quite traumatic and I think it’s affected me permanently. I’ll never think about Gallipoli again without all these words. All these blokes speaking to me, clamouring to get their voices in the book.”

“Maybe when I go to heaven they’ll give me an AIF uniform. I don’t think I’ll get a Legion of Honour. But I’ll get an AIF uniform, and they’ll say, ‘Well, thanks for your help, digger.’”

DOSSIER

NAME Jonathan King **AGE** 53
OCCUPATION Writer and storyteller
LIVES Seaforth, Sydney **BORN** Geelong
FAMILY Wife Jane and four daughters, Lowanna, 29, Bryony, 26, Mollie, 24, and Charlotte, 19
CAREER HIGHLIGHT Pulling the First Fleet Tall Ships together in 1988
LIKES Women, adventure and travel
DISLIKES Bureaucracy, insurance premiums and the education system not teaching great traditional stories of Australian history

- **Top of page** -

[About](#) - [PR Whiz](#) - [Writer](#) - [Broadcaster](#) - [Jetsetter](#) - [Homebody](#)
[Links](#) - [Contact](#) - [Site Map](#) - [Home](#)