

Ms Roslyn Poignant

The degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa) was conferred upon Roslyn Poignant at the Arts ceremony held at 2.00pm on 21 April 2006.



Associate Professor Anthony Masters conferring the honorary degree upon Ms Poignant, *photo, copyright Memento Photography.*

Citation

Professor Masters, I have the honour to present Mrs Roslyn Poignant for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa).

Roslyn Poignant (nee Izatt) was brought up in the Sydney suburb of Maroubra. She graduated from this University in 1949 with Honours in History and Anthropology. She was then employed by the Commonwealth Department of Information Film Division. Among various projects, she edited footage of Aranda and Loritja ceremonies, filmed in Central Australia by the linguist T. G. H. Strehlow. In 1950 she met the distinguished photographer Axel Poignant whom she married in 1953.

From the time of their meeting, Roslyn became increasingly involved in Axel's photographic work. During his trip to Arnhem Land in 1952 she developed negatives and made contact prints from film he dispatched to her in Sydney. The prints were flown back to Arnhem Land so the Aboriginal people he was living with could see the results of his documentary work.

In 1956 Roslyn and Axel sailed to Europe, initially with the intention of returning to Australia. However, London became their home from that date. Axel built up a successful practice and Roslyn developed her own profile as an independent scholar. Specialising in Indigenous cultures, she acquired detailed knowledge of Australian and Oceanic material culture through collections in London.

In 1969 Roslyn and Axel travelled through the Pacific where they worked collaboratively with indigenous communities in Tahiti and Papua New Guinea to produce books for children. Conceived as 'photo-narratives', Roslyn wrote the text and Axel took the photographs. Designed to encourage young readers to engage with different cultures, the books *Children of Oropiro* and *Kaleku* proved commercially successful and were translated into numerous languages.

For many years Roslyn Poignant had been fascinated by the major collection of photographs held by the Royal Anthropological Institute. She curated a seminal exhibition of ethnographic photography titled *Observers of Man*. It toured the United Kingdom and Europe from 1980 until 1984. After Axel's death in 1986, Roslyn continued to exhibit and interpret his work, and to develop other interests. She was Honorary Secretary of the Royal Anthropological Institute from 1988 until 1997. In 1995 the Institute honoured her with the Patron's Medal, presented by the Princess of Wales, in recognition of her study of anthropology and photography.

Piecing together this remarkable narrative was a feat of historical detective work. Scouring the archives of Europe, Australia and America, she learned how two groups of North Queensland Aborigines were removed from their communities by R.A. Cunningham, a showman and agent for the circus proprietor P.T. Barnum. They were toured internationally as ethnological exhibits. Most died along the way. In addition to her archival research, Mrs Poignant worked with the Aboriginal community on Palm Island, where stories of the abductions had been handed down.

In 1993 she was researching the story in the USA when the remains of Tambo, one of the people taken by Cunningham, were discovered in the basement of a Cleveland funeral home. Mrs Poignant travelled extensively in Europe, Australia and North America during the 1990s. She was a Harold White Fellow at the National Library of Australia in 1994. Her publications from that period include *Encounter at Nagalarramba* (1995), a work of scholarship based on fieldwork in Arnhem Land. At the settlement of Maningrida she worked with community elders to interpret photos Axel had taken there nearly fifty years earlier.

The book provides rare insights into the way photography has been schematized into an Aboriginal world-view. The project also formed the basis for a touring exhibition 'It's About Friendship': The Rom Ceremony in Arnhem Land, now housed permanently at Maningrida.

During this period, Mrs Poignant was also working on her longest and most demanding book, a study more than ten years in the making. The seed had been planted when she was researching *Observers of Man* and found a photograph of three Aboriginal people - a man, woman and child - whom she would come to know as Billy, Jenny and Toby. The image, dated 1885, was taken by the anthropological photographer Prince Roland Bonaparte in Paris. Mrs Poignant became determined to find out where in Australia they came from and what they were doing so far from home.

Mrs Poignant was involved in the repatriation of his mummified body, which was belatedly laid to rest in his ancestral country. She told the story in an exhibition, *Captive Lives: Looking for Tambo and his Companions*, which was seen by more than 300,000 people. The written account is the book *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle*, published by Yale University Press in 2004.

Roslyn Poignant is widely recognised as a scholar, a communicator and an advocate for the rights of Indigenous people.

Professor Masters, I have great pleasure in presenting to you, for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa).