

Putting flesh on the bones of history

The Ballarat Base Hospital is an important institution, very interesting and very loveable...an institution which inspires loyalty and affection.

Dr Anthea Hyslop, hospital historian, speaks of it like a dear friend, an entity of which she has become very fond in the 22 months in which she has been working on the official history of the past 125 years.

An interim publication, *The Aim in View*, a pictorial guide to the history, has just been released as an appetiser for the historical delights which are yet to come.

Dr Hyslop promises that the main book — like the pictorial prologue — will be full of interest. History should never be dull, she believes.

For nearly two years she has been delving into old records and minute books, newspaper files and other sources of historic material for the bones of the history.

Of even greater interest to her has been the oral history — personal reminiscences of past staff members and patients, who have found her an intelligent, charming and sensitive listener, quick to glean the relevant gems from their memories.

"Everyone has been very kind, very

of the hospital in the context of Ballarat as a community, its health services and social background.

The history is to be published about 1987, but she hopes to complete her research and writing in the next 15 months.

Her work is already having relevance in wider fields. This week she gave a medical history paper to a conference in Melbourne on the great influenza epidemic of 1919 and its effects on the hospital.

An interesting dispute arose as to whether the hospital should house the flu victims.

At first they were refused because it was so infectious. Patients went to the show-grounds. After local councils became involved, the hospital accepted them, with the overflow at Pleasant Street School.

The pneumonic influenza was so severe that it had longlasting and often tragic effects on people's health.

The title *The Aim in View* is a play on the words and ideas behind the booklet — a view of some of the fascinating pictures she has already collected (some of the best have been kept for the history proper, she says), a glimpse of the project ahead, and the aims of both the history project and the hospital — medical and philanthropic.

She has found interest in the shift in em-



Dr Anthea Hyslop... the best is yet to come.

etons in the cupboard", though she has turned up some amusing anecdotes on the lighter human side of life.

One from the early years concerned a puzzling discrepancy in the "medical comforts" — glasses of ale and spirits allowed to the patients as stimulants. The mystery was solved when the dispenser himself was found helplessly drunk in the women's ward, with a friend.

Apparently the doctors had been cancelling the orders verbally but he had continued to dispense, consuming the excess beverages himself.

Of even greater interest to her has been the oral history — personal reminiscences of past staff members and patients, who have found her an intelligent, charming and sensitive listener, quick to glean the relevant gems from their memories.

"Everyone has been very kind, very gracious in letting me hear their reminiscences," she said. But she feels sure that there are many more fine memories out in the community which could contribute to the history, to be published in about three years time for Australia's Bicentenary.

She hopes that the publication of the pictorial prologue — a taste of the flavor of the history to come — will be a stimulus to these people to get in touch with her.

Dr Hyslop is not a medical doctor, though she has specialised to some extent in medical history.

She is a freelance historian, working in the field of Australian social history.

Born and educated in Adelaide, she has taught both at La Trobe and Melbourne Universities and has published articles on social reform, feminism and the temperance movement in Australia.

She did her Ph D on social reforms in Melbourne from 1890-1914, with particular reference to the role of women.

She holds a current appointment as Visiting Research Fellow in History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Melbourne, and is under contract to write the official history of the Base Hospital.

She said that the book was to be as full a history as possible — not just buildings and costs and people in office, but the history

of the booklet — a view of some of the fascinating pictures she has already collected (some of the best have been kept for the history proper, she says), a glimpse of the project ahead, and the aims of both the history project and the hospital — medical and philanthropic.

She has found interest in the shift in emphasis of the aims of the hospital. The aims of healing the sick and training staff have remained, but originally it was a charitable institution for the poor who could not afford doctors or private care.

Now it was the centre of elaborate specialised work, which was only available in the big public hospitals or private hospitals of a very high standard.

Dr Hyslop can tell a fund of stories about all the pictures in the book — Thomas Hillas, the first Australian surgeon to perform a Caesarean on a live patient (and how this came about); W.L. Richardson, an early Ballarat doctor whose life was immortalised in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, the famous novel by his daughter "Henry Handel Richardson"; a silver trowel used by Henry Cuthbert for laying a foundation stone and again on a later occasion by his son; old coins retrieved from the second foundation stone, which had replaced the original ones that had been stolen in 1862; doctors who were scholars and pioneers in their day.

She speaks of the fine buildings and gardens and the amazing life work of John Ross, gardener for 55 years until he died at the age of 86. Trained on a duke's estate in Scotland, he was a founding member of the Ballarat Horticultural Society and his gardens were famed.

Surprisingly perhaps for a hospital, she has found no "skel-

etons as skeletons." The mystery was solved when the dispenser himself was found helplessly drunk in the women's ward, with a friend.

Apparently the doctors had been cancelling the orders verbally but he had continued to dispense, consuming the excess beverages himself.

A sad aftermath was that not only did he have to leave, but his wife did, too. She was the matron.

There is a more recent story from the 1940s about a young nurse who had "laid out" a dead patient and left the room temporarily. When she returned, the patient was sitting up in bed with a glazed stare.

The nurse's blood curdling shriek of fright could be heard for some distance.

It transpired that the patient was indeed dead. But another patient, who was not very bright, thought she didn't look too well and had sat her up in bed and tried to give her a drink of water.

Needless to say the incident is not in the pictorial guide. This stops in the 1950s, but the main history will cover 125 years to 1981. Dr Hyslop anticipates finding the more recent history harder to write.

It is more difficult to stand back from current history and form an independent view, and to deal objectively with people who are still part of the scene.

She is developing a personal love for the Base and Ballarat, despite only tenuous connections in the past. Her father, Professor of French at Adelaide University, used to visit Ballarat to take French oral exams when he was a lecturer in Melbourne, but her only experience of the city was a point on the journey in visits to Melbourne.