

## The Chapters: The benevolent lens of Alan K Jordan

Tess McLaughlan:

State Library Victoria acknowledges the traditional lands of all the Victorian Aboriginal clans and their cultural practices and knowledge systems. We recognise that our collections hold traditional cultural knowledge belonging to Indigenous communities in Victoria and around the country. We support communities to protect the integrity of this information, gathered from their ancestors in the colonial period. We pay our respects to their Elders, past and present, who have handed down these systems of practice to each new generation for millennia.

It's a cold and bright morning in 1970s Fitzroy. A crowd of people have gathered on the footpath to watch a bulldozer tear down an old terrace house. The people wear heavy coats as they talk quietly. The bricks and wood of the house crumble under the weight of the metal claw, sending dust and debris into the air. The noise is deafening. Among the spectators is a man with a camera. He snaps a few shots of the demolition, capturing the expressions of the onlookers. Some are angry, others are sad, a few are just indifferent. He moves closer to the fence that separates them from the site, looking for a better angle. This man is Alan K Jordan, a social worker and photographer. He works at the Hanover Centre, a pioneering social service for the homeless in Fitzroy. He knows many of the people who used to live in this house, and he also knows that they were forced to leave when their landlords sold the property to make way for a high-rise apartment block.

Soon the job is done. The roar of the bulldozer goes quiet, and the old terrace house is no more. The crowd disperses and Alan leaves, just like everyone else. Through his photographs, Alan K Jordan was one of the first to document the changes Melbourne went through in the 1960s and '70s. He captured the contrast between his own comfortable life in Carlton and the harsh realities of his social work clients living in Fitzroy. He showed the faces and places that were so often ignored or forgotten by mainstream media and society.

Today we'll discover his unique perspective on Melbourne's urban transformation and how Alan's legacy was much more than his photos. You'll hear how Alan was a trailblazer in changing society's view on people experiencing homelessness. This is his story.

Welcome to *The Chapters*, a show from State Library Victoria all about the incredible stories of some of Victoria's unsung trailblazers. Now, you probably know about State Library Victoria's beautiful reading rooms and galleries. You may have even come to see Ned Kelly's armour on display. But this show is about the stories that are hidden at the Library, the ones that you may never have heard of, and the librarians who discover them. I'm your host, Tess McLaughlan, and I'm lucky enough to spend my days exploring State Library Victoria's rich collection and, in partnership with our talented librarians, bring its stories to you.

Melbourne is a city that never stops changing. It's always been a place of growth and development, of progress and innovation, and you'd ordinarily think of this as a good thing – and in most cases it is. But not everyone has benefited from these changes, some people have been left behind, displaced or marginalised by the forces of urbanisation and gentrification. How do you see these people? How do you hear their stories? One man who tried to answer these questions was Alan K Jordan, a social worker and photographer who worked in Fitzroy in the 1960s and '70s. He used his camera as a tool to document the lives and struggles of his clients, many of whom were experiencing homelessness, poverty or other social issues. Today we're joined by Susan Long, one of the librarians at State Library Victoria. Susan specialises in the art and social impact of photography, and she's particularly fascinated by Alan's photography. In this episode, you'll hear how Alan used his camera to reveal the hidden history of Melbourne. So, let's open another chapter.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

Well, Susan, welcome to the show.

**Susan Long:**

Thanks very much, pleasure.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

So, we're going to dive really deep into Alan's story, but before we do, can you tell me in a few sentences who was Alan K Jordan?

**Susan Long:**

Well, he was primarily a social worker, but he was also a social activist. Actually, he was also a zoologist or biologist as well. And he very much engaged with the homeless men in Fitzroy during the 1960s and early 1970s, and he was a photographer.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

In your opinion, what's the significance of Alan's photographs?

**Susan Long:**

Well, first of all, no one was photographing homeless men with such empathy, and it wasn't voyeuristic, it wasn't judgmental, and in fact, it was documentary photography at its best.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

To start today's episode, let's go back to the beginning of Alan's story. He grew up in the Wimmera, but in the early '50s he moved to Melbourne to study at university. He was the first member of his family to go to university, and he went to study zoology. But not long after coming to Melbourne, Alan decides that zoology is not for him and makes a change, and he decides to become a social worker. I asked Susan why he decides to do this.

**Susan Long:**

This is really interesting because I think it points to the huge empathy that Alan had for his clients, and in fact, the fact that he referred to the homeless men as his clients was quite radical for the time because they were just seen as welfare recipients. But he very much said, 'no, these are my clients.' So, when he was in his early 20s, and I think it was about 1956, he actually had an episode of mental illness. Apparently it was misdiagnosed as schizophrenia, and he received electric shock treatment, and it was such a frightening experience for him that this is what shifted his point of interest, and that's when he became involved with the Methodist Church in Fitzroy. In fact, he had a friend there, Alf Foote, who was the reverend – that's how he actually became involved with working with the homeless men.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

And it's clear that he was passionate about homeless people. I'd imagine that would be something of an uncommon view at that point, was that the case?

**Susan Long:**

That's actually very interesting that you make that point because at that time, homeless people – primarily homeless men – they were frowned upon. They were discriminated against, and there was also that role that alcoholism played as well. There is a photograph that Alan took of men lining up to get food from a window with bars on it and someone handing one of the men a pie. So, it was sort of like, it's very shameful, and also, if they were to receive lodging or food, they had to go to church and they had to engage with the activity then. So, there'd be a sermon delivered and it was expected that they'd be thankful as well.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

And Alan was a key founder of Hanover House, a pioneering homeless support agency. Can you tell me a bit about Hanover House?

**Susan Long:**

Well, actually, Alan was instrumental in the formation of Hanover House. He wrote a short paper in 1963, 'Men Without Homes'. He's still working with his friend Alf. There was a lot of interest in this at the time, and so the different organisations came together – the church groups, welfare groups – and this is what initiated that conversation. Then in about 1964, Hanover House was established, so he was quite instrumental in that.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

So, the event that actually started this whole story was the donation of some of Alan K Jordan's photos to State Library Victoria. I wanted to know what it was about these photos that got Susan interested in learning more about them.

**Susan Long:**

Well, actually, if I may go back to an interview, which I think you might've done with one of his daughters last year, Caroline, and also probably make reference to the fact that he had a science background. It was this that he brought to his research. He was very much into written records, visual records, and he had his 35mm camera, so it would've been analogue. He shot negatives, he wasn't a professional photographer. However, he was very talented, he had a really good eye, and it's also really important to contextualise when he was taking those photographs, so say '60s, '70s or late '60s, early '70s. At this time, documentary photography was... wasn't quite different, but it existed on a different platform than now. Often people would just photograph people in the street, (and) wouldn't take their name, their details, or ask their permission. So, when one looks at Alan's photographs through a contemporary lens, one might think that they're voyeuristic and even slightly removed.

But in fact, having read about Alan and his social work and his empathy for his clients, it's not the case. In fact, he was using these documentary photographs to promote an understanding of poverty at the time and homelessness, and the publication that came much later, in the '90s, he's quoted as saying that he met a woman in the street who was homeless. She asked for a cigarette, he gave her one, and then he took her photo. It's sort of, in a way, proof that he did engage with the people he was photographing, and in fact, it's a practice that still exists now where you have this informal consent of the person who you're photographing.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

Well, speaking of the publication, Alan's photos were eventually published in a book called *Going Bad: Homeless Men in an Australian City*. Can you tell me a bit about the book?

**Susan Long:**

Well, interestingly enough, it was published in 1994 – 20 years after he did his thesis, so we're going backwards and forwards. So, what happened in 1973...Alan started his master's thesis in sociology at La Trobe University, and I think it was the first year they had the sociology master's course available, and he had documented the lives of over 1000 homeless men, so that was his thesis, and he completed that in 1973–74, but it was never published. Then in 1994, it was published with private funding, and in that publication there's an afterword as well. Alan does reflect upon the fact that there was probably several things he would've done differently, but also that really, if anything, it's a record of the time and a memorial to the people that he did photograph.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

And in the written piece, his photos are described as showing Melbourne's inner suburbs during a period of great change in the 1960s and 1970s. Can you go over how we see that depicted in the photos?

**Susan Long:**

Well, I think what's really interesting is at that time there was a lot of demolition and a lot of the houses, those little working people's homes, were being demolished to erect the Ministry of Housing's, what we now call, the high-rise flats. So that was happening, but what I noticed about his photographs is they have a lot of space in them, and the other thing is that at that time, Fitzroy wasn't as gentrified as it is now. You were getting people moving into the inner city, but it was nothing like what it is now. It was still heavily populated by working class people, and in the streetscapes that he's done, you often see the Ministry of Housing complexes in the background.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

The photos that Alan K Jordan took really paint a fascinating picture of life in this period of time. You'd be forgiven for thinking that this is what made him such a unique person. But in addition to his photography, Alan is also described in the written piece as a pioneer in changing how homeless people were viewed. So, I asked Susan how he did this.

**Susan Long:**

Well, first he became the social researcher for the federal government. Then he actually had a lot to do with the Homeless Persons (Assistance) Act in 1974, and he would've been a very unusual public servant because he was highly committed to advancing change for the homeless people of Australia, not just the city of Fitzroy. I think he would've been forthright and quite honest, and I get the impression from the publication, near the end of the book, that it probably didn't pan out how he thought it would. But the other thing too, you could say he was responsible for changing attitudes – people's attitudes towards the homeless and towards people who are materially disadvantaged. The other really important thing, he showed the significance of social research in actually creating social policy – not just for now, but in the future. So, it was a bit of a template, really.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

So how did Alan end up in Canberra?

**Susan Long:**

Well, actually, I think he was asked by Brian Howe, who was a federal minister then, to actually move to Canberra and engage with the research in that Labor division and to also actually play a really important role in the homeless persons legislation.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

You just mentioned an act that Alan was a key part of that was the Homeless Persons Assistance Act of 1974. This was quite a landmark legislation. Can you talk about what it was?

**Susan Long:**

I would say historically, up until then, homelessness was associated primarily with vagrancy and also alcoholic men. Then had it become a social issue by this time. Then in fact, we did have homeless women, and it's so interesting too because now homelessness is such a huge issue in our everyday lives, and especially too, that increase in homelessness is in that area of older women as well. Of course, Alan's thesis was on homeless men, and occasionally there were women that he would work with or speak to or photograph, but really, homelessness was not associated with women at all. That's a big change, and for '74, that was what was quite remarkable – that they were thinking not only about the present, but the future as well.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

And would that mean that the women weren't getting the kind of assistance that the men were getting at the time?

**Susan Long:**

I don't know whether it was assistance, or recognition, and I think probably homelessness was so much associated with single men.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

He was also actually making real policy changes, benefitting people experiencing homelessness. Susan has spent so much time researching Alan, so I was curious what she thought was his biggest impact on the world.

**Susan Long:**

I'd like to go back to the library catalog and look at the images because, in a way, looking at his photographs, it redeems that environment, that time, and also reintroduces this visual social history to contemporary viewers. For myself personally, I lived in Fitzroy in the middle '70s, and when I look at those photographs, I don't have to try to remember where they are or what's there now. I actually have that emotional memory, and actually have memories of coming home from a party one night and forgetting my key and walking down the back lane and scaring the living daylights out of myself because I fell over drunk men who were just collapsed. So, for me, it brought back a lot of that environment at the time, and in the street I lived in, there were boarding houses for so-called single men as well. Then for people who probably didn't live there at that time, I think probably it could be quite shocking as well, and then also, it could be really quite joyful, especially the photographs of the kids in the street and some of his family shots as well.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

To wrap things up, were there any big challenges in researching and writing about Alan?

**Susan Long:**

Well, it always helps if you have a publication, and then also there was a lovely obituary that was written for him when he passed away. Brian Hale – he was a federal MP at the time – wrote the foreword to the publication, and that was quite insightful too. He made the point that before, or since, has one individual, a social policy researcher, had so much impact on legislation.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

And if people want to see Alan's photos for themselves, is there a way that they can do that?

**Susan Long:**

The catalogue is the way because they're negatives. The photographs of the



homeless men are very powerful as discrete images, and I think the ones that are more of the family and some of the street landscapes, they work better when you see them as a group, as you work your way through several images.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

Well, thanks so much for joining me on the show, Susan.

**Susan Long:**

It's a pleasure, thank you.

**Tess McLaughlan:**

You've been listening to *The Chapters*, a show from State Library Victoria all about the incredible stories of some of Victoria's unsung trailblazers. If you're interested in finding out more about today's topic, you can read the article that this episode was based on, which you can find in the show notes. For more information about State Library Victoria's collections, events and services, head over to the Library's website at [slv.vic.gov.au](http://slv.vic.gov.au) or visit us in person.

This show was recorded in the podcast studios of State Library Victoria, and it was produced in partnership with Wavelength Creative. To make sure you don't miss an episode of *The Chapters*, be sure to subscribe to or follow the show in your podcast app, and while you're there, leave us a five-star review. It really helps others find the show. I'm your host, Tess McLaughlan, and I'll see you in our next episode as we open another chapter.

This podcast was recorded by State Library Victoria on the lands of the Wurundjeri people.