Everybody who has a connection with disability in Australia will recall the Kew Cottages fire of April 1996, an event whose horror was almost eclipsed by the subsequent coronial acknowledgement that the tragedy had been waiting to happen, with a negligent state blamed as the key contributor. That event led directly to hastening the de-institutionalisation of the residents of Kew Cottages, a process due to be completed in 2008. Corinne Manning’s book was written in part because of the concerns of parents of some of the Cottages’ residents that the closure of the Cottages, Australia’s largest institution for people with intellectual disabilities, would mean the loss of their history. This book is not a history of Kew Cottages but an oral history of Kew’s stories. The book’s primary focus is the experiences of Kew residents and it is structured to represent the paths they took – the journey to Kew, the sojourn and, for some, the departure – while encompassing the groups who shaped that journey, including staff and families. Harrowing accounts from parents and siblings about the pain of separation give the lie to any belief that the instruction to ‘put the child in a home and go away and forget about it’ could be easily obeyed. Because the book is largely framed by the memories of those associated with Kew, its earlier history from the time of opening in 1887 as Kew Idiot Asylum is dealt with only briefly in the short introduction. Ted Rowe, the little boy pictured, aged four, on the front cover, was admitted in 1925, Lois Philmore in 1941, but the stories necessarily derive largely from memories of the latter part of the twentieth century.

Following the lead from Britain, Manning is in the vanguard of Australian researchers from a range of disciplines presently grappling with the issue of recording the least audible voices in Australian society. Central to the book, metaphorically and structurally, are the stories of the residents themselves, presented in one of the book’s longest chapters, ‘At the Heart of Kew’s History’. A series of vignettes accompanied by contemporary and historical photographs individualises fourteen former residents. The dates of their admissions to Kew are incorporated in the timeline at the beginning of the book as a neat symbolic affirmation of the significance of individual lives in demarcating the history of the institution. Based on both the words of the residents and information gleaned from other sources – institutional notes and staff and parent comments – the stories give a rich feel for how life in Kew was remembered. The individuals are not ‘ghetto-ed’ into the ‘heart’ chapter alone, but reappear throughout the text. The downside of this is that the same words and stories are re-used in different contexts. The story behind the phrase ‘Bye Bye Charlie’ for example, is used at least twice and a number of other such snippets
are similarly repeated, which does tend to provoke an irritatingly recurrent feeling of déjà vu in the reader.

Kew was a residence, but also a workplace. It seems to have been a place where largely unskilled workers could find employment, with the paid workforce a microcosm of Australia’s immigrants since the 1950s. Some spent a working lifetime there and their memories, while focusing on the more positive elements of their own experience, also outline some of the physical deprivations experienced by the residents, in particular the children. A chapter entitled ‘chattel slaves?’ deals with residents’ work but while it is clear that unpaid labour was important in keeping the institution running, the skills learned there sometimes facilitated employment outside Kew for residents who left.

The focus on work as a positive experience for residents shows how some ascribed meaning to their lives within the institution. Equally important was the strength of feeling some residents felt for one another. This element gives weight to the arguments of those who feared de-institutionalisation, that those relationships and that constitution of community would be lost once residents were dispersed into different living facilities. The author has chosen not to focus on the bitter debates about de-institutionalisation which split the disability ‘community’ but the last paragraph of her book expresses the poignant hope that ‘the deprivations that many of the residents suffered at the Cottages are counterbalanced by high quality levels of community care … promised by the Victorian Government’ (239).

Inside the jacket of the book is a DVD. More than simply a complement to the text it is structured along the same lines as the book and contains the voices of the participants, including the interviewers. This adds extraordinary resonance to one’s visualisation of the project’s participants. As anyone who has ever worked with oral history knows, transcribing is a double-edged sword, facilitating the process of broadcasting the speaker’s words while simultaneously paring away much of their colour and emotion. (Interestingly, it was my perception that the DVD presented a bleaker, grimmer view of Kew than does the book itself.) In this particular project, transcribing and presenting stories only as written text would also have limited their relevance and accessibility for many of the Kew residents themselves. Oral history may well give voice to those who have not previously been heard, but the logical corollary, the need to give stories back to the people who told them and lived them is not so generally recognised. With its sound clips and its evocative gallery of images, many of which are used in the book as well, this DVD should not be overlooked by those purchasers of the book who would more usually focus exclusively on written text.

In writing this book, Manning must have worked through similar problems to those encountered by commissioned historians: doing justice to the ‘truth’ about institutions, which since Goffman’s classic work *Asylums* has been largely understood in terms of violence, exploitation and abuse; and to the feelings of the participants. There are parents who believed they were doing the right thing by their children and who in effect had no other choice, resident individuals who remember their lives with dignity and as a positive experience, staff who were not always perfect but who worked in sometimes difficult conditions and did their best to manage circumstances beyond their control. Perhaps for that reason, this book undeniably leaves much about the history of Kew Cottages unsaid. There is an absence of any profound reference to the politics of disability or its larger social context. The chapter on ‘the Kew salute’, for example, which documents some of the physical and sexual abuse which took place in Kew, was an unused opportunity to locate
Kew’s history within broader understandings of institutional life, with the violence exhibited there long understood as endemic to most institutions of this sort. Kew was many things to many people. While multiple voices deliver this message fairly directly, the thematic structure of the book, the chapters shifting from good times to bad, sometimes make it difficult to understand how these very different facets of life in Kew were experienced simultaneously. On the whole the depiction of Kew is a positive one and this choice is embodied in the book’s title. ‘Bye-Bye Charlie’ hints at a child-like regret for something left behind; ‘the vanishing world’ evokes nostalgia. Manning’s attempts to balance competing views of Kew does lead to some feeling of unresolved ambivalence within the book about this institution. However, it is a book which does justice to its intention: to preserve those personal aspects of Kew’s history which will all too soon be lost. Other historians might well view Kew’s history differently, but none will be able to ignore Manning’s findings and anyone working in this area owes her a great debt.