

Peter MacFie asked his brother Rob in 2022 to add this summary of Gus Downie's life to Peter's website¹ to check how far we have come with disability services and access since Gus's lifetime of work in the field.

It has been based on Gus's own unpublished biography, written in 2002 when he was aged 62. Gus left this with Peter to 'do something with, sometime'.

Now, with Peter himself suffering serious health issues, it has been edited by Rob MacFie in discussion with Peter MacFie in January 2022. The photos are from Peter's collection.

Angus Downie AM

Advocate for the Rights of the Disabled, political journalist and activist, writer, commentator, supporter of minority groups, adviser to State and Federal Committees



1: Gus Downie in his car with modified controls, 'breaking' a news story, outside Peter and Raine MacFie's house in Park St, New Town, prior to their moving to Dulcote in 1971.

Angus (Gus) Downie was born in 1946. For much of his life Gus and his wife Irina lived at Riverton, a 35-square home near Huonville Tasmania and had one son, Andrew.

¹ <https://petermacfiehistorian.net.au/about/family-stories/angus-downie/>

Throughout his adult life Gus, in the main, held two separate career lines. The first was professional and the second, working for the community on a voluntary basis.

Educated at the old, academic, Hobart High School between 1956 and 1960, Gus accepted a position as Junior Parliamentary Officer with the Tasmanian Legislative Council. He had planned to study at the University of Tasmania on a part-time basis from 1962 while combining it with Legislative Council work. If that had emanated, Gus would have risen to the senior post of Parliamentary Clerk either in Tasmania or with the National or an Interstate Parliament.



2: Rowing teams at Hobart High School. Gus Downie front row, right.

Back row - G. Taylor, J. Berry, T. Leitch

Fourth row - A. Calvert, D. Collis, A. Oakham, G. Minchin

Third row - P. Stevens, P. Storr, P. Dorney, W. Lowe

Second row - T. Dowe, L. Reid, D. Salter, P. Van Schie, R. Watts, Mr M. Poole

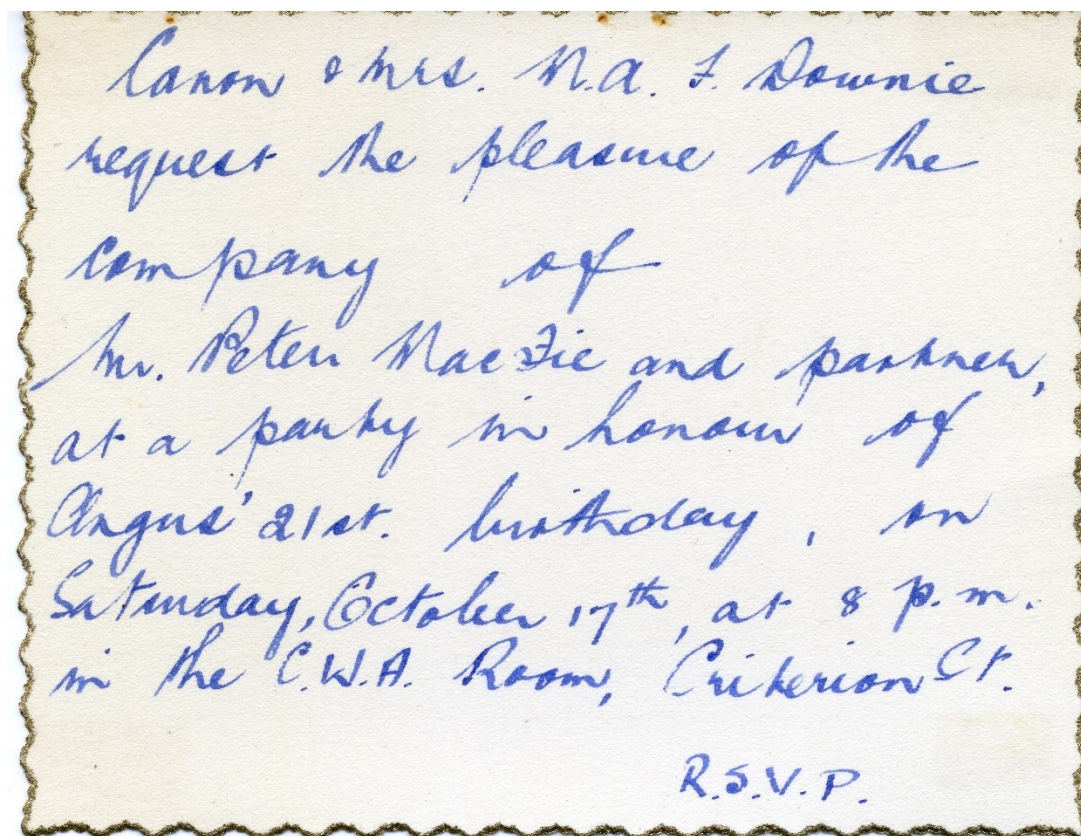
Front row - J. Moore, I. Winter, C. Collis, G. Little, A. Downie

However, a road accident in March of that year resulted in Gus breaking his spine and being confined to a wheelchair for life. As that ended his planned career and university study due to the lack of wheelchair access, Angus took a junior position, in 1963, with the former Public Works Department (PWD) where he remained until 1973.

There was no MAIB (Motor Accident Insurance) or other financial assistance in the mid-1960s when Gus' medical costs were horrendous. Instead, after the accident he rejected the pressing advice to accept a life pension and vowed to find work (within the PWD) and pay his own way while contributing to society by paying taxes. To assist with the lack of mobility Gus saved and bought his first – modified – new car. This proved to be a saviour.

To offset the lack of job satisfaction with the PWD, Gus threw himself into various community activities "out of work hours". These began with sporting administration via the Buckingham Rowing Club during its peak period of rowing domination (and with whom he had previously rowed), and subsequently various positions at a State rowing level. Angus also became a radio announcer for rowing regattas in various parts of Tasmania.

From 1963 he also threw himself into voluntary work for the Tasmanian Paraplegic Association (founding secretary) and as a member of the Australian Paraplegic Council. Despite early setbacks, the Tasmanian Association by 2002 evolved to become the million-dollar business and activist body known as ParaQuad Tasmania.



3: Peter's invitation to Gus's 21st birthday party in 1967



4: Gus Downie was Best Man at the wedding of Lorraine Burns to Peter MacFie at St Aidans Church, Lindisfarne, on December 1967. From left, Gus, Rob MacFie, Peter, Lorraine, Sally Burns and Monica MacFie (née Wastell). The wedding ceremony was conducted by Gus's father, Canon Downie.

In 1968, and while still with the PWD, Gus joined the Australian Journalists' Association and, again on a casual basis, began night work as a Freelance Journalist for *The Mercury*, *The Australian*, *National Review* and *The National Times*.

At the same time Gus continued with the disability movement, becoming the first President of the Tasmanian Association of Disabled People, and represented the Tasmanian Government at an international disability conference in Hong Kong. This was followed by a month's study tour of disability-related facilities and government meetings in other South-East Asian countries.

Thus began a lifetime learning curve about issues affecting disabled people and provided the platform upon which Gus made many national and international contributions.

For example, Angus' work in the PWD with architects and contact with Standards Australia initially lead to the first Australian Buildings Standard applying to public building access for disabled people (AS 1428). This was written and trialed in Tasmania.

(Much later Gus involved himself further by ensuring total access – at the design stage – of the new National Parliament, and also convinced Canberra to modify all Embassies and High Commission buildings.)

Late that year (1968), Gus was surprised to learn that he was to become the first Young Australian of the Year in 1969. This was initiated by Rupert Murdoch's newspaper, *The Australian*, and QANTAS, and in turn, this would again lead to more travelling and disability-related studies and conferences in India, Germany, the U.K., Ireland and the United States.

Whilst in New York in 1969, Gus was offered a key position with a United Nations N.G.O. (then the International Society for Rehabilitation of the Disabled). This would have involved moving to New York with extensive travelling backwards and forwards to South America and South-East Asian countries. Gus turned down this offer for personal reasons and that, at the age of only 26, he felt he was too inexperienced.

Back in Tasmania, Gus continued with the P.W.D., was seconded by the Health Minister, the late Merv. Everett, as his part-time disability adviser, and maintained these due roles with Everett's successor, the late Dr. Alan Foster. Dr Foster urged Angus to "spread his wings" by using his knowledge further afield.

Eventually, in late 1973, Gus decided to leave the PWD – in spite of warnings that he would lose job security – was married – and launched out as a full-time journalist.

That decision resulted in his departure from all rowing attachments and much of the work under-taken in the disability area.

However, the next three years saw Angus joining a small partnership and the launch of "*Weekly Review*," a small "insider" newsletter about Tasmanian politics, industrial relations and the business and commercial sectors. It was the first of its type in the state, lasted for three years, and broke a number of "big" stories.

This period saw Angus' continuance with the newspapers mentioned above, plus London's *Daily Telegraph*, on-air radio work for the Macquarie Broadcasting Service via 7HO and the research, writing and publication (on contract) of two historical booklets. Late 1975 also saw the joint purchase with Gus' late wife, Irena, of their home referred to above.

In 1976, Gus was asked to join *The Examiner Newspaper* as a senior political, industrial and investigative journalist, and where he 'broke' the majority of the major stories over the next period of his busy life. These included all the big cabinet, political, public service, trade union, forestry and environmental issues plus the emergence of the "Green" movement.

After only 18 months, Angus was quickly rising through the ranks and in 1977 won the inaugural and prestigious "Keith Welsh Award" for Tasmania's "most out-standing Journalist of the Year."

At that time there seemed to be few challenges left and in 1981 Gus took his family on an extended 3-months holiday, driving and exploring Canada, some 26 of the American states and returning after visiting the Greek islands where Irena had relations.

Unfortunately, that was when health problems began.

On returning to Australia, Angus ended up in a Melbourne hospital for major surgery.

Then, after returning to work (November 1981), he realised that the “big Tasmanian issue” of the day, the Franklin River and Dam, had not advanced further since his departure. However, that quickly came to a head on his discovering a financial error in the State Government’s financial calculations and its “planting” of a misleading story in the public domain, coupled with a deep split on the issue inside the Caucus.



5: Angus Downie at his home, "Riverton" at Huonville' with his brother Tim Downie.

In the period between 1982 and 1989, both Irena – a teacher – and Gus had lengthy periods of illness and on-going surgery that resulted in Angus’ resignation from *The Examiner* to care for her after she was eventually diagnosed in 1988 with an inoperable brain tumor. She died in November 1989.

After this serious turn of events Angus lost any interest in writing which had always been his first love. Gus was at a loss about his future.

However, immediately prior to Irena’s death, the then Federal Government approached him to resume a new advisory role between the Government and the national disability movement that, while it still had divisions, was by then a more mature organisation.

Angus accepted the position on a part-time basis until late 1991, when he was again asked to lead a small team of disabled people to examine and write a report with recommendations about how Australia could ensure that in future, all public transport could be made easily accessible for all people with mobility problems, including those in wheelchairs, and a fast-approaching ageing society.

From his previous overseas study trips, Angus was aware that the U.K. and U.S.A. had also been trying to solve the same issue with mixed success. Fortunately, Gus already had some informed ideas based on the previous visit to Europe.

It was just the fresh challenge Angus needed and so he accepted the position.

Then much later, in early 1993, After he was committed, there was a change to a Government that was less enthusiastic about the project. Gus found that the new Government was prepared to offer office space for a national secretariat, some staff assistance, telephone and computer services, and some small expenses but not pay a salary.

By this time an interim report had been submitted while a separate committee auspiced by the Federal Department of Transport (on which Angus was a committee member) had also been established to undermine Angus' work and eventually fail.

He had been lucky to have strong allies in the Federal Labor minister (Laurie Brereton) and his then Coalition successor (John Sharp), who both agreed with the need to dispense with the "bureaucratic committee" and let his work proceed. However, this was still on an unpaid basis.



6: ALP Christmas Function 6 December 2003. Gus Downie (The Examiner) with reporter journalist Wayne Crawford (The Mercury)

Gus continued with these tasks, starting with a massive literature search, national surveys and the conduct of the first of three separate consultation visits to each state and territory. Meetings took place in all capital cities and also in major regional centres. There were also some 15 separate industries conferences and meetings with their officials present, in all states and territories.

The 500-page report was completed single-handedly, and published and launched in September 1994.

This was later followed by its adoption and a request by a Perth meeting of the Transport ministers' Australian Transport Council (ATC) that Angus work with a senior NSW transport bureaucrat and his personal staff to implement the recommendations by writing the National Standards. Again, Angus agreed to the request.

In addition to the National Standards, Gus held many separate one-on-one ministerial meetings, lead two more capital city and regional centre consultative meetings in each state and territory, attended and addressed three international conferences (Florida, Perth and London), conducted an aviation seminar in Canada, and met with Volvo's senior design engineer who was seconded to head a separate Development Company in Sweden. This latter meeting and vehicle inspections proved most beneficial.

Eventually the Australian Standards were completed and were enshrined in Federal legislation in November 2002, winning world-wide acclaim (notably in the USA and UK) for their simplicity and flexibility.

In 1994 Angus Downie was made an AM (Member of the Order of Australia) for his contributions in Journalism, Community Service and notably the blueprint Transport report.

The Governor-General is pleased to announce the following appointments
and awards:

THE ORDER OF AUSTRALIA

To be a Member in the General Division (AM)²

Mr Angus Alan DOWNIE

"Riverton", Huonville Tas 7109

For service to people with disabilities in Tasmania and
as a member of the Disability Advisory Council of Australia.

Further, in 2002 Gus received a special "Top Achievers Award" for his work that will ensure that all public transport will become accessible over four, five-year phases, with the completion deadline of 1st January 2023. (Editor's note 2022: has this been completed or near accomplished?).

² Commonwealth of Australia Gazette, National, 13 Jun 1994, p4, THE QUEEN'S BIRTHDAY 1994 HONOURS

By the end of 2002 Angus had returned to research and some writing after a forced period of semi-retirement brought about by exhaustion. During this interim period Gus researched and wrote a detailed synopsis for one historical book while two or three more were planned.

This is the point at which Gus's autobiography ended.



7: Lifelong friends - Peter Brand, Angus 'Gus' (the dook) Downie and Peter H MacFie. Near The Studio at Peter MacFie's Dulcot Cottage. Photograph by Christopher Cowles © 2016.

Angus died 30th October 2010. The love of his life, Irena, predeceased him on 29th November 1989.



8: Peter MacPhie visiting the grave of Gus Downie and Irena Downie.
