

A story of solace and grace

Local historian Ruth Cotton is best known for uncovering the stories of Hidden Hamilton. In her latest book, she shares her own story, that of a woman who refuses to be defined by a devastating diagnosis.

Story by Cornelia Schulze

Ruth is a country girl who has spent formative years of her career working abroad or in international cooperation.

She is an educator at heart and passionate about public health, but most importantly, she draws from a seemingly endless well of empathy and curiosity, of energy and resilience.

"My husband Ken and I came to live in Hamilton in 2012," shares Ruth. "I was retired and moving into a new community at a later stage in life, which can be challenging. I was looking to make a new life closer to my family, and stumbled upon this history thing, with no idea where it would lead.

"I could see that Hamilton had a past, from its traditional owners through its history as a mining settlement to the Italian, Greek, Macedonian and other immigrants who came here in the aftermath of World War II."

Getting real

"I'm good at fossicking for information but I got out of the library pretty quickly and started talking to people. Hamilton's immigrants really wanted to tell their stories and are just as much part of the suburb's fabric as the early miners."

Ruth began a long running history blog, Hidden Hamilton, which was later curated and published by Hunter Press in two books. She championed informative plaques on historic buildings along Beaumont Street and created the Hamilton Heritage Walk which has now been turned into an award-winning mobile version. She has even found time to successfully advocate for street safety in Hamilton, to write stories for the



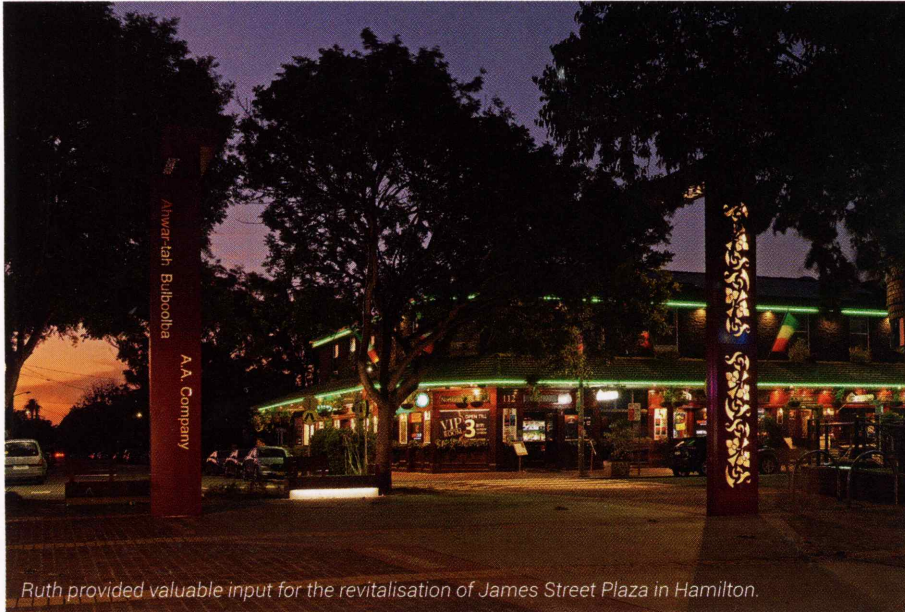
By focusing on what is close to her, discerning beauty and care in small moments and the simplest of interactions, Ruth finds not just joy, but also meaning, solace and grace.

Hamilton Local (now The Local) and the Hamilton Business Association, provide insights for the revitalisation of James Street Plaza and to collaborate with local artists, engaged in enhancing Hamilton's streetscape.

"I like to start something, and if it goes well, someone else will take it to another

stage. Then I can pass the baton," says Ruth, her passion and enthusiasm shining through.

While leading this full and active life, she has been battling a devastating disease. In her new book, *A fragile hold: Living with multiple sclerosis and other uncertainties*, she shares her



journey, from the day she walked out of her neurologist's office with the diagnosis in 1997.

At the peak of her career and with three children, she refused to let it dictate what she could achieve. It wasn't until her retirement that multiple sclerosis exacted its greatest toll – slowly taking her balance and mobility. In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic confined Ruth indoors, news came that her husband's cancer – melanoma, diagnosed years before – was accelerating. Overwhelmed by a sense of life's fragility, Ruth turned to writing to make sense of it all.

"I had no intention of writing another book, but then I remembered a book by Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way*. I was attracted to one of her key tools for a writer's creative recovery: the morning pages. She exhorts her readers to write, by hand, three pages every morning without fail. And to write whatever comes to mind."

Ruth adapted Julia's instructions and started writing three to four micro essays each month, soon sharing them on a private blog.

"I couldn't control the outcomes of my life, but I could influence them.

This, I believed, was the way I would rediscover joy."

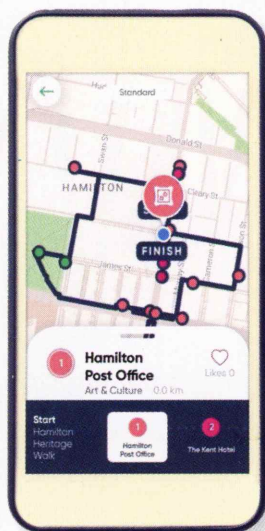
It is these essays that Ruth has now formed into a memoir, which she describes as being more about "emotional truth than a chronological story."

A Fragile Hold reveals with warmth and unflinching honesty the daily, intimate scenes of a life with multiple sclerosis. It's a book that manages to be searingly direct, gentle and uplifting in equal measure.

Of navigating daily chores she writes, "As I step off my mobility scooter and lift my walker off the back to enter a shop, I feel pleased with my independence.

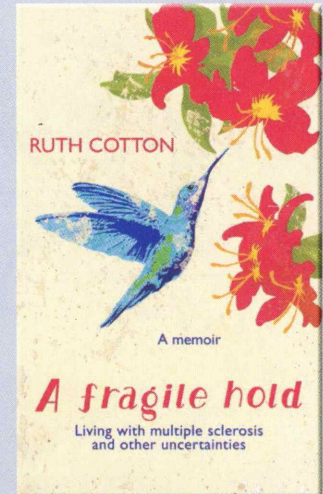
I can still walk but not far. Occasionally people stop and tell me what a great idea it is to carry a walker on my scooter...I agree,' I reply. 'It's far better than crashing into the grocery shelves at any minute!'

"We each make decisions about how much risk we are prepared to take in our lives, the extent to which we step out of our comfort zones. I like the perspective of author and professor William G.T. Shedd, who coined this quote in 1928: 'A ship in the harbour is safe – but that is not what ships are built for.'"



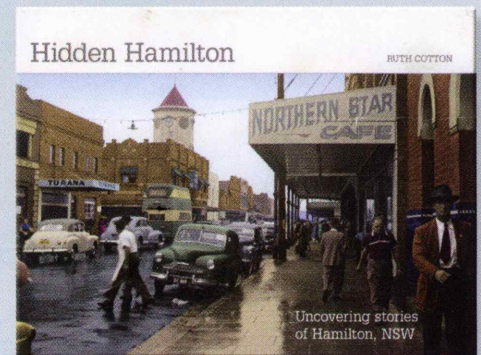
With support from City of Newcastle, the Hamilton Heritage Walk has been turned into an award-winning app by Heritage Now.

RUTH'S BOOKS AND WHERE TO BUY THEM

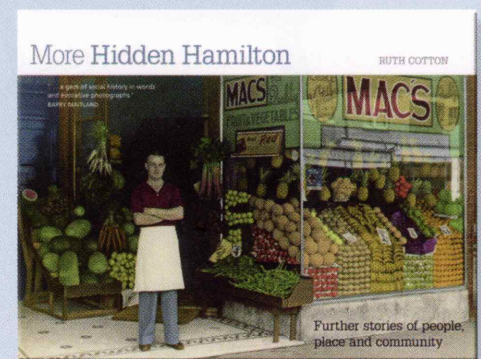


A fragile hold: Living with multiple sclerosis and other uncertainties.

Available at all good bookstores. Paperback (\$29.95) and epub (\$6.99), 326 pp, can also be ordered from Amazon, or Apple Books and other online stores.



Hidden Hamilton: uncovering stories of Hamilton, NSW. Paperback, 98 pp, \$39.95



More Hidden Hamilton: Further stories of people, place and community.

Paperback, 98 pp, \$39.95. Available at hunterpress.bigcartel.com or McLean's Booksellers, Hamilton. Find out more at www.ruthcotton.com.au.