

Collective Historical Consciousness and Community Identity: A Selective Social Memory?

By Jessica Stewart

Local history plays a complex and tumultuous role in shaping those who are privy to it.

Whilst a strong feeling of historical belonging can develop and validate a community's sense of self, it can also be undermining. Past events that seem to vilify the legacy of Lennox are threatening to the local collective identity. This intimate edge of local history heightens the stakes regarding who is qualified to write, preserve, and ultimately own the past.

The brochure is a product of this historical intimacy. Whilst a relative amount of license was granted, there was nevertheless a set list of events and places that were selected to take part in the trail. Whilst it is understandable that the indiscriminate inclusion of everything is unrealistic, the resulting trail is very carefully manufactured; it only encompasses what the heritage society deems worthwhile.¹ Conveniently, 'worthwhile' history seems to only ever reinforce the positive aspects of the town's story. This kind of historical amnesia proliferates a history that is easily swallowed by its highly invested residents. Source selection subtly disfigures local history and smoothly cuts away the darker underbelly of Lennox's heritage.

While the many flying foxes of Lennox Head's Flying Fox Rd are remembered fondly, the killing site of an unknown number of Aboriginal people remains unnamed, under-researched

¹ Confino, A. (1997). Collective memory and cultural history: problems of method "The American Historical Review, 1386-1403.

and excluded from the heritage trail. The details of the violence and brutality are preserved through the memory of the Black Rock Massacre of neighboring town Ballina. The killings in Lennox were an extension of this ongoing violence. However, the massacre in Ballina is better preserved – stories of escape, of those who were shot, and of those who were driven off the cliff. There is a belief that many victims were not buried; their bodies merely thrown off the headland at Black Rock.² Lewis Cooke, an Aboriginal elder, recounts: “There were lots of massacres here at that time, they shot em’ here, there, out at Coraki, poisoned them with flour... so (Aboriginals) more or less moved out into the bush when the cedar cutters came.” The trauma of these events lived through the generations. Susan Anderson describes how her Grandfather, the last survivor of the Ballina massacre, endured the event:

“He took his family home then went back with his two sons to see if anyone was alive. They buried the dead in the dunes... they found a mother dead and two small children alive. They put them in the boat and rowed to the island with them.”³

The archives of the Heritage society only reference the massacre once. It records Lewis Cooke’s statement: “The burial ground at Lennox Head was where a lot of Aboriginal people were massacred about the same time as the massacres at black head.”⁴ Although it was requested that the burial site be left undisturbed, all artefacts were nevertheless pilfered. The public record only mentioned the burial ground in the wider context of land development proposals and without reference to the massacre. The general concern was focused more on the accidental excavation of human remains.⁵

Nevertheless, to give the task of preserving Lennox’s heritage to an outside, less invested

² Jinda Walla Self Drive Tour of Aboriginal Heritage Ballina to Lennox Head 2003 Ballina Cultural centre Ltd.

³ Anderson S., We are the custodians, Northern Star, Saturday 22/04/06

⁴ Oral History Lewis Cooke, Bundjalung Ngyable Elder and Traditional Owner of Lennox Head land Interview 26th January 2005

⁵ Jinda Walla Self Drive Tour of Aboriginal Heritage Ballina to Lennox Head 2003 Ballina Cultural centre Ltd.

party is also deemed inappropriate. The Richmond Tweed Heritage Society records Lennox Head history, as well as that of the entire Richmond Tweed region. Otherwise known as the Northern Rivers, this area includes Tweed, Lismore, Ballina, Byron, Richmond Valley, Kyogle and Lennox Head. Lennox locals felt that this regional conglomerate could not accurately preserve the nuanced past of the tiny coastal town. And it is true that Lennox Head is often overlooked. For example, a Parliament of NSW E-brief titled 'Richmond-Tweed Region: An economic profile' did not mention Lennox Head as its area was subsumed in Ballina's local government district.⁶ This conflict raises larger issues of who should own and write the past. The Lennox Head Heritage Society believes the Richmond Tweed society too removed from the town's culture. They felt that Lennox locals were better qualified to preserve and maintain the past. Lennox locals are distinctly aware of the differences between Ballina, Byron and Lennox in both history and culture. However, these subtleties are often unobserved by the larger, and better funded, historical society. Yet Lennox locals are also slightly less inclined to go hunting after an incriminating history, and the unwritten Aboriginal experience is easily foregone.

In an effort to address the selective social memory that seems to dominate Lennox's historical record, the brochure attempts to speak with a dual historical voice. Whilst colonial history is still expressed, it is done so in the backdrop of a wider context. The history of the Aboriginals is presented in sharper detail. For instance, in the original brochure, Aboriginal Middens were defined merely as discarded oyster shells. This cavalier treatment of the significant Aboriginal site, which dates back as far as 1,200 years, seems reckless.⁷ Whilst the intention was hardly malicious, the result is disheartening. The Middens were merely mentioned in the greater context of the construction of North Creek Bridge. Past residents destroyed the now protected site by using the ancient oyster shells to construct a road leading towards the bridge. Discourse surrounding the preservation of Aboriginal sites has evolved dramatically since the

⁶ Wilkinson, J. The Richmond-Tweed Region: An Economic Profile NSW Parliamentary Research Service July 2014 e-brief 11/2014

⁷ Spyker M. The Lennox Wave Remembering Our Aboriginal Heritage March 2015

60s, thus the former residents hardly acted out of malice. Yet the downplay of the Midden's significance in the brochure lessens the shock of the destruction of the site, and draws the focus back to the bridge's construction.

Nevertheless, the Middens were mentioned. Not every site was awarded such luxury. The history of Lake Ainsworth, for instance, is promoted as one of Lennox's main tourist attractions. Yet the lake is only spoken of in relation to white settlement: the diving tower, the sailing and the fitness camp take the centerfold. Yet this historic site was of sacred to the Aboriginal people. It was a women's birthing lake and seen as having great medicinal qualities. Men were also allowed access only on the western point of the lake. However, this information is totally excluded from the original brochure. Therefore the new brochure is an attempt to fit colonial history into the wider narrative of Aboriginal heritage. By attempting to highlight the dual significance of certain sites from both a colonist and Aboriginal perspective, the brochure attempts to write local Aboriginal history back onto the record. The format of the brochure/heritage walk, in being both publicly accessible and personally engaging, is the ideal platform to attempt this change.

Thus community identity is buttressed by a collective historical memory. Due to the prominent role of local history in fostering a community's sense of self, the impact of the past is substantial. Therefore the role of preserving and recording the history is wrought with issues. Whilst an accurate representation of the past events is desired, this attempt at accuracy is reserved only for positive events. The darker edges of the town's history remains wholly unexamined and ultimately excluded from the mainstream discourse of the town's local history.

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