

Reflective Diary
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10 August

This week, and perhaps for the first time that I have properly done so, I considered how history functions outside of the academic environment. The *Enola Gay* controversy illustrated that the way in which an historical event is presented in a public space can be highly controversial, and that historians working on these projects must tread a somewhat careful path between achieving historical accuracy, and being aware of popular understandings of events. I am curious to see how these tensions will come into play with our own major projects for this unit. Scrutinized not only by one marker but also potentially by our broader community – how will this influence what histories we choose to present, and the way in which we present them?

At this stage, I am hoping to volunteer for a local historical society or group, as I am interested in experiencing how such societies engage with, and perceive history.

17 August

On Wednesday I sent an email to the Central Coast Family Historical Society (CCFHS) enquiring on the possibility of volunteering for them. Having listened to Annette Cairnduff's talk this afternoon, however, I feel that a lot more would have been gained by contacting the society directly via a phone call or even face-to-face, in order to have a more nuanced conversation about what historical work they would like done.

Certain ideas resonated with me from this week's seminar, particularly those brought forward by Martha Sears. Evoking a day of "history-making" in the rural shearing town of Hay, Sears challenges the view held by some academic historians that community history is somehow "degraded" or unimportant to the academic world, contending that such views ignore the *connectedness* of community history to other forms of history-making. Sears suggests that history can be considered "ecologically": as a "dynamic system" in which every element contributes to "the rigour and health of

the whole.” This view is helpful, I think, in understanding how community or public history ‘fits’ with our (as university students) traditional conceptions of history, and helps to challenge some prejudices we as academic historians may have.

24 August

Louise Prauss shared some practical advice this week to consider when interacting with community historical societies. What seems somewhat obvious, but is something that I had not previously considered until Louise’s talk, is that community historical societies themselves often have a long history, and with that a set way of interpreting and presenting the past. How will this figure in the way I interact with my chosen organization? What today’s seminar has highlighted is that it is important to *listen* to what kind of questions you society want clarified or interrogated, and to be flexible with your research questions.

Mark McKenna, reflecting on his history of place in *Looking For Blackfella’s Point* invited us to consider how a historical consciousness of a given community emerges, through patterns of keeping and remembering certain stories. Mark prompted us to be conscious, too, of the authority a ‘local’ of an area often possesses, and the challenges this can present to an historian writing on that area.

31 August

Twitter, WordPress, Instagram and Facebook are mediums I had previously never conceived of as viable platforms to capture and interrogate the past. However, Michaela Cameron’s talk today and her previous work for the Dictionary of Sydney, Yelp, and with the Parramatta Female Factory Friends demonstrates that history can indeed be presented through these mediums, and opened up the idea that we could harness these platforms for our own projects. Michaela’s projects demonstrate too that such platforms readily allow for the inclusion of visual material that assists in making one’s work entertaining as well as informative. This speaks, I think, to our previous consideration of how to present history in public spaces, and how best to engage your readers in your work.

I have reached somewhat of a roadblock in my community engagement: despite attempts to make contact with the CCFHS, I have received no reply to date. This may well be due to outdated contact information on their website. The group also appears to have not had a meeting recently and so perhaps they have encountered some difficulties of their own.

In light of this I have looked into getting in contact with alternative organizations, operating around the Sydney region. The Heritage Group of Leichhardt District (HGOLD) appears, by their website, to be quite an active group. Their involvement in producing an exhibition and walking tour for Leichhardt Council's celebration of NSW "History Week" grabbed my attention. I will contact their president to see if volunteering for them is possible.

11 September

After my slightly disheartening attempts to link up with the CCFHS I was certainly apprehensive about how much success I would encounter when contacting HGOLD. The prompt reply of Sue Tronser, HGOLD's president, dispelled my concerns and set the ball rolling: upon her suggestion I actually contacted another historical group, one operating in Marrickville (as I had mentioned that I lived in the area) and this afternoon received a positive reply from the group's newsletter editor, Richard. The group – the Marrickville Heritage Society – will get back to me with concrete suggestions as to what work I can assist with in the next few days.

What I perhaps did differently this time around was that I was careful to look into the past work the group had conducted, and to also mention why I had chosen to approach their society.

16 September

The Marrickville Heritage Society have asked that I assist them in a) writing historical articles for their blog (with the purpose of garnering new membership), b) contributing an article to the upcoming newsletter and c) volunteering at the society's

stall at the Marrickville Festival. I have also been invited to attend their next committee meeting and their upcoming excursion to the Royal National Park.

24 September

I met with Deborah, who runs the MHS blog, this afternoon to discuss research avenues she would like me to pursue in my blog articles. Meeting at the Marrickville Library (of which, future researchers should be careful to note, there are *five separate branches*), Deb showed me the previous publications of the society housed in the library's collection and introduced me to the workings of the blog site. My experiences this afternoon made it clear that 'history-making' was taking place in spaces (in public libraries, bus stops, even taxi cabs¹) where I had not taken care to notice it before.

The reading from Julia Horne this week has also provided useful food for thought during my community engagement and research process, particularly her assertion that the differences in people's recollections, while often dismissed as the fallibility of human memory could be re-examined as "shared authority", in which an intermeshing of evidence provides a "nuance to the study of the past."

October 6

"History is a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands."

Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (1994)

History "at work" gained a new meaning following my experience observing the MHS committee meeting this evening. For over two hours the committee discussed recent development proposals and threats to heritage in the area, in particular that of the impending demolition of a Spanish-style 1940s service garage on Princes

¹ On my way to the library a taxi driver and I discussed his recent research into his own ancestry, in particular tracing the first migrants from Lebanon to Australia using Trove and ancestry.com.

Highway. Around the “heritage watch” table I observed how efforts to preserve sites of historical value involves a constant process of negotiation (with developers, residents and councils). I found too – specifically in the case of the family-run service garage – that history at times constitutes more than simply stories remembered from the past but is instead more tangibly embedded in a particular *place*.

I intend on harnessing these observations to use in my major project, which is, (at this stage) going to take the form of a series of blog posts or perhaps a blog of my own.

October 18

This morning I volunteered on the MHS stall at the Marrickville Festival. What I found striking about this experience was that history is often very personal to individuals of the public: those who approached the stall were interested in tracing the history of the places they had grown up in, or newcomers to the area sought to forge a connection to the locality through engaging with its heritage. Striking too was the frequent mention by passers-by of their memories of old buildings now replaced by new developments: places that might otherwise seem inconsequential were imbued with significance.

I have started work on my individual project, a blog centering on the history of places in the Marrickville region (<https://patternsofkeeping.wordpress.com/>), and am working through the challenges of weaving analysis and footnoting into the non-academic ‘blog’ writing style, and the problem of not always having ‘polished’ sources for the sites I am researching. It is also a great deal of fun 😊

October 30

What has become clear from the research and writing process, the guest lecturers, readings, excursions and community engagement is that history operates in a different way outside of the academic sphere. In communities history is often deeply personal, and this influences what stories/places/people one chooses to write about, and the way in which you write about them. And as one class member remarked today, when

working on histories within communities, significance is often “decentralized”: what is considered ‘worth’ preserving, what stories are remembered are not always clear-cut. Patterns of keeping emerge from a constant process of remembering, telling and negotiation.