



The University of Newcastle  
History Club  
Department of History

**STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS  
IN  
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY**

No. 7

1982

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## PREFACE

The 1982 issue of Student Research Papers continues the practice began last year of publishing the best first year essays on aspects of life and work in Newcastle 1938. As explained in the last issue, the History Department of the University, along with colleagues from the C.A.E., is involved in research and writing for the 1938 volume of The Australian Bicentennial History Project. We have been training selected students to interview Novocastrians about life in 1938 from an interview schedule arranged by the National Oral History Project connected with the 1938 volume.

Ten students were selected this year to carry out at least one interview (one student Barbara Gaudry interviewed four people) and then, on the basis of controlled background reading, to write an interpretative essay on the problems deriving from work (or the lack of it) which faced a family during 1938. The results, like last year, were varied and many of the same problems were encountered despite our ironing out many of the wrinkles associated with the 1981 project. These papers are valuable mainly as training exercises for our first year students. We have continued to publish them in this form because, in spite of their incomplete nature, they help to give outsiders a glimpse of the rhythms of private experience associated with life in Newcastle and the coalfields.

The papers by Gaudry and Owens deal with the lives of men in Newcastle heavy industry in 1938. Payne's paper also deals with that work experience but adds a dimension to do with the Anglican church and its handling of industrial issues. The effects of religion, of Primitive Methodism specifically, on the lifestyle and expectations of a mining family at Dudley is also highlighted in Curtis's essay. Finally, Deacon examines reflectively the meaning of a single person's life experience in 1938 within the wider pattern of 'history'.

These are tentative steps towards 'people's history'. We hope the Student Research Papers will contribute a little to the data for a social history of this area and with it, to the story of what it meant to be an Australian in 1938.

Sheilah Gray  
Peter Hempenstall  
Margaret Henry

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ISLINGTON 1938: A SINGLE LIFE WITHIN GENERAL HISTORY

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by Brett Deacon

Whether it is written by Clark, Turner or McQueen, 'left' history does not solve the problems of the story of the 'common man'. History by these writers usually becomes mono-causal or tends to give a single base for human activity. For instance, the fifth volume of Clark's A History of Australia stresses violence to the point of 'lunacy',<sup>1</sup> while McQueen pronounces a revolutionary stance.<sup>2</sup> All this makes one smile at the myth of objectivity. Moreover, it shows how dangerous general history can be when the student wishes to place the experience of individuals within a historical context.

"It is extremely difficult to rise from the apparent movement to the real movement of history and discover their intimate connection. There are indeed great difficulties in rising from the phenomenon of passion, oratory, Parliaments, elections and the like to the inner social gearing to discover in the latter the different interests of the large and the small bourgeois, of the peasants, artisans, the labourers, the priests, the soldiers, the bankers, the usurers and the mob".<sup>3</sup>

In historical writing, then, processes and wide movements must be seen as working upon people. Consequently, to take Labriola's points further, the link between the individual, community and the broader affairs of humanity must be established as real concerns in social history. Often, in the rush to obtain the 'causes' and the 'effects', historians miss the event itself. Yet, for the people of past ages the 'event itself' was the whole of history. Furthermore, the subjective outlook of these people must be considered. Every person is locked in time.<sup>4</sup> Most live according to the times they are placed within. So, the question of writing effective social history revolves around the solution of the problem of empathy.

Before delving into the personal experience at the centre of this essay, a brief sketch of relevant broader events in the late 1930s is necessary. Alexander described the period as one of 'roads to recovery'.<sup>5</sup> Moderate improvement after the depths of the depression was the keynote of 1938.<sup>6</sup> Economic conditions, while not being as difficult as during the 1929-32 period, may still be described as 'tight' for many Australians, particularly the working class.<sup>7</sup> The era has also been seen as one of 'momentous slow change'. However, for people in 1938 life did not appear to be undergoing this change. Economic life in cities often revolved around industrial work and its associated infrastructure. While wages increased during the late 1930s actual physical conditions in the inner suburbs deteriorated.<sup>8</sup> Newcastle displayed these features. It was 'a heavily working class city dependent upon a single industry which was very sensitive to economic fluctuations'. In particular, Newcastle displayed a strong communal feeling, the people being 'essentially Novocastrian in character'.<sup>10</sup>

Into this picture we place an individual and her family. Mrs.G. was a member of a working class family of three. An interview with

Mrs.G. revealed that in 1938 their personal economic situation was 'bad' and 'grim'.<sup>11</sup> A partial explanation relates to the post-depression environment of the nation as a whole. Unemployment remained high<sup>12</sup> in a country which was still recovering from the 1929-32 crisis. As such, though, these facts tell little of the specific reasons why this family suffered hardships. Mrs.G. provides the necessary details:

"...naturally in that sort of position and economic conditions were bad and from my memory he (Mrs.G.'s father) seldom worked. In 1938 he ceased to work at all because of a heart condition brought about by wharf labouring because it was very heavy then, you had no machinery etc."<sup>13</sup>

So, a part of hardship was individual misfortune and the particular aspects of one job in 1938. Where does adversity lead individuals? Mrs.G. was given a great motivation to obtain money. Here, good fortune played a role. Historians sometimes forget that 'luck' is a determinant of events. Life for many is a combination of fortune and misfortune. While Mrs.G. was unlucky in having an unemployed father, she was able to obtain an office job through 'fortuitous circumstances'.<sup>14</sup> So, while material life was generally hard for Mrs.G. it would be inaccurate to paint a picture of complete despair. History mixes 'good' and 'bad'.

Perhaps this fact may give an insight into the somewhat intangible aspects of human behaviour. One of the problems with the general historical explanation is that it deals with human motivation in too simple terms. A look at Mrs.G.'s situation might tempt one to conclude that she would rebel against any attempts to integrate her into the existing 'system'; pictures of Connell's "working class mobilisation" come to mind.<sup>15</sup> At best, we may expect to find a dissatisfaction with life and its concomitants. However, this was not the case. Mrs.G. fully accepted the chief socialization factor, the school, and even concluded that "the students got on very well with the teachers".<sup>16</sup> Despite having such strong opinions Mrs.G. could not explain her conformity.<sup>17</sup> An interpretation of interview material does not aid an explanation - Mrs.G.'s parents were 'fair',<sup>18</sup> she had received corporal punishment and been kept in at school; teaching included 'authority'.<sup>19</sup> Mrs.G.'s answer was that her feelings could not be put down to anything 'specific'.<sup>20</sup> Frequently, people cannot explain why they act. This leads the idea of historical causality into the field of the intangible.

People may act in a particular manner because they see no escape. Many aspects of life are 'taken for granted'. Subsequently, Mrs.G. explained much of the acceptance of life as it was in these terms. Corporal punishments were an expected part of the school routine for those children who misbehaved. Respect for an employer was 'a natural thing, a natural discipline of the day'.<sup>21</sup> The value system which prevailed was 'a point in history'.<sup>22</sup> People did not question ideas and thoughts. In this context, the effectiveness of a school<sup>23</sup> system which de-emphasised innovation, at least for women, is vital. Also, strict limitations upon outlook prevailed. There was no idea of moving out of the suburb, people being content to survive as and where they were; a conservative policy dominated whereby people did not take large risks.<sup>24</sup> Strict discipline, both at school and in the home<sup>25</sup> was a strong inducement for people to acquiesce in social norms. But it must be stressed that these factors should be combined with the rather more intangible explanations stated above.

Several more direct links between general trends and particular experiences may be established. The social/leisure activities of Mrs.G.'s

family were structured largely by the economic and social features of 1938. Having little employment, family members had a reasonable amount of leisure time.<sup>26</sup> Both determinants of behaviour were present in the walking journeys undertaken:

"...walking...bike racing was very popular and we always walked to Carrington for those...And we'd also regularly have hikes. All the family would go to that - carrying all the hampers".<sup>27</sup>

Walking and sport were inexpensive pursuits. Also, the extended family played a role. An interesting point is that it was not a belief that only working class families had restrictions in these areas. Nearly everyone had to walk (or ride bikes) because 'at that time there were no motor cars'.<sup>28</sup> Other inexpensive forms of entertainment included community singing and talking.<sup>29</sup> These activities were an important part of social life and, as will be shown later, played a vital social role.

All of these activities had a definite communal facet. Even family recreations were large, the walks to Carrington including neighbours.<sup>30</sup> Community singing was a group event. Mrs.G. could remember gatherings at BHD for this as well as singing by groups of people in the households with pianos or pianolas.<sup>31</sup> Talking was a nightly communal affair. People would 'come out onto their verandahs or talk over the fence'.<sup>32</sup> Men would sit upon stools and converse while children played in the streets. In essence, then, the whole of the small community would gather each night, thereby developing a strong social atmosphere. One particular aspect of this was Friday night shopping:

"Friday night was a very social night for people who lived around our area because Beaumont Street in Hamilton...was a scene of great activity. We always walked down there. You met your relations and you met your friends, up and down each side of the street. You'd stand and you would talk to them... You'd have different bands on each corner (brass bands were very prevalent then). You would have your chocolate wheels..."<sup>33</sup>

In 1938 a wider society was a very observable part of the individual's experience in the inner suburbs of Newcastle.

One of the positive aspects of the combination of influences was community supportiveness. Mrs.G. talked of 'a great spirit of helping people'.<sup>34</sup> People who were in work helped those who were not. Mrs.G. summed it up as: 'people cared'.<sup>35</sup> With a combination of difficult economic situations and a local community feeling, the community established mutual aid. More than general movements, these aspects of local community served to form the experience and determined the actions of individuals.

Also, this community had a profound effect upon value systems. Manners were highly prized. Mrs.G. used the cliché that children were expected to be 'seen and not heard'.<sup>36</sup> More than being a platitude, it was largely accomplished fact. Mrs.G. described herself as being 'shielded'.<sup>37</sup> The acceptance of a particular lifestyle indicates a conformity to the value system. What was this commitment?

It was one of social support, a type of practical socialism'. Mrs.G. talks of people with vegetable plots and poultry, sharing produce with other families.

Other ideas predominated. The people had an experience (non-experience is perhaps more apt) of the world which was dominated by the British empire. Here, Mrs.G. confirms the conclusions of Mr. McMahon Ball about the effects at that time of a British-dominated Australian news service.<sup>39</sup> Also, the complete assimilation of this value system could be seen in a poem written for a competition in 1938:

"Ye girls of British race  
Famous for your beauty  
Breed fast in all your grace  
For this is your duty.  
As Anzac gave in war  
So daughters at your call  
Will quick respond the more  
To replace those that fall".<sup>40</sup>

If any indication of class struggle is to be gleaned from 1938 it must be modified by the above factors. Far from living in smouldering discontent a working class 'looked up to professional people'.<sup>41</sup> Mrs.G. stated that in many areas, such as domestic servants' employment, there was not a significant class situation. Domestic servants were 'included as one of the family' so that 'there was not an upstairs/downstairs' arrangement.<sup>42</sup> One particular reason why the working class did not form as a unit was the community feeling within Newcastle. Mrs.G. described suburbs as being involved in rivalry - the 'Martins and the McCoys'.<sup>43</sup> It would only be at times of particular hardship that these differences would be transcended. Locality offset class.

Although Mrs.G. could not look upon 1938 as a happy time, the year could not be described as one of change, conflict or upheaval. Perhaps the best description of the life is that it was dominated by hardship, producing distinct social values, but no open rebellion as such:

"It (the community values) was just accepted.  
I think it was a way of life at that time, and  
of the economic times and of the area you were  
living in...".<sup>44</sup>

A difficult life, then, does not necessarily breed negative values or open violence.

Historical analysis should be wary of any single 'causality formula'. The interview with Mrs.G. indicates that general information, statistics, surmises and people's subjective formulations must be woven together. Only with this could something which approaches empathy be attained.

## FOOTNOTES

1. C.Veliz's article "Bad History", Quadrant, May 1982, pp.21-26 (lunacy quote p.23).
2. A New Britannia, Penguin 1975 edition, pp.13-14.
3. Quoted by Don Watson in Brian Fitzpatrick Sydney, 1979, p.164.
4. Manning Clark makes a similar point in the foreward to A New Britannia.
5. F.Alexander, Australia Since Federation, 4th revised edition, Melbourne, 1980, p.102.
6. Unemployment statistics for the years 1933-38 show this:
 

	Australia	N.S.W.
1934	20.5%	24.7%
1935	16.5%	20.6%
1936	12.2%	15.4%
1937	9.3%	10.9%
1938	8.7%	9.9%

Quarterly Summary of Australian Statistics Nos.147-148 p.58.
7. Kylie Tennant's phrase, quoted by Connell and Irving in Class Structure in Australian History, Melbourne 1980, p.279.
8. Ibid., pp.279-280.
9. J.C.Docherty, 'The Second City: social and urban change in Newcastle, N.S.W., 1900-1929', Ph.D. thesis, ANU, 1977, p.282.
10. P.Haslam, 'Notes on Newcastle 1938', Interview, Newcastle University Archives.
11. Interview, tape 1, side 1, count 38-45.
12. The level was 8.7% for Australia and 9.9% for N.S.W. Quarterly Summary of Australian Statistics Nos.159-174, p.58.
13. Interview, tape 1:1, 38-45.
14. Mrs.G. first obtained a job cleaning a shop. The family which lived next to this establishment owned a provendor's office. Mrs.G. became a friend of these people and obtained a job in this office. Interview, tape 1:1, 240-52.
15. Connell & Irving, op.cit., p.188, chapter sub-title.
16. Interview, tape 1:1, 99.
17. Interview, tape 1:1, 105.
18. Interview, tape 1:1, 440.
19. Interview, tape 1:1, 99-111.
20. Interview, tape 1:1, 90-99.
21. Interview, tape 1:1, 437.
22. Interview, tape 2:1, 130.
23. Interview, tape 1:1, 60-90.
24. Compare Student Research Papers in Australian History, No.6, 1981, p.29.
25. Mrs.G. mentioned how men at this time were strict disciplinarians.
26. Interview, tape 1:1, 325.
27. Interview, tape 1:2, 745.
28. Interview, tape 1:1.
29. Interview, tape 1:2, 814. Mrs.G. stated that 'everyone had a Boomerang Songbook'. People would also talk in the evenings until 9 or 10 o'clock at night.
30. Interview, tape 2:1, 40.
31. Interview, tape 1:2, 814.
32. Interview, tape 2:1, 75.
33. Interview, tape 2:1, 27.
34. Interview, tape 2:1, 100.
35. Interview, tape 2:1, 105.
36. Interview, tape 2:1, 160.
37. Interview, tape 2:1, 155.

38. Interview, tape 2:1, 100-125.
39. Ball stated that since Australian news was dominated by British sources, Australians would hold a British-styled world view. F.K. Crowley, Modern Australia in Documents, vol.1, pp.599-600.
40. Quoted by Humphrey McQueen in Social Sketches of Australia 1888-1975, p.158.
41. Interview, tape 2:1, 245.
42. Interview, tape 1:1, 273. An important aspect of class is the subjective idea of the individual.
43. Interview, tape 2:1, 120.
44. Interview, tape 2:1, 115.

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2. Documents and Statistics

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3. Specific Arguments

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