



The University of Newcastle

History Club

Department of History

**STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS  
IN  
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY**

No. 6

1981

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## PREFACE

This year sees a slight change in the nature and emphasis of the published Student Research Papers. In previous years they have been the product of Second Year students working on topics of their own choice from primary sources. As of 1981, Australian History is a first year subject only, and it was thought initially that the quality of primary research by First Year students would not be up to the standard we had set for the Research Papers in previous years.

However we have, in 1981, gained the opportunity for a new kind of historical training exercise, for the Department has become involved in research and writing for the 1938 volume of the Australian Bicentennial History Project. In particular a Working Party has been organised to carry out an oral history survey of life in Newcastle in 1938 using an interview schedule adapted from the oral research 'headquarters' of the Bicentennial Project.

The Working Party, comprising University and CAE staff, decided that students from both institutions should be invited to assist in order to widen the scope of the enterprise and to provide useful training in research and writing techniques. The exercise would be integrated into existing Australian History courses as part of the students' normal assignment work.

Each institution has proceeded in the manner best suited to its course requirements. We in the University chose some fifteen students from over a hundred in our First Year course and gave each a set of background readings on national and local history for the 1930s and some tuition in interviewing techniques. The students chose their own interviewees, people who were articulate and had good memories of Newcastle in 1938, were at least fifteen years old then and were still living in Newcastle in 1981. Because of competing course demands, each student was required to do only one interview and then to write an interpretative paper on the issues facing men or women in Newcastle in 1938.

This was very much a pilot project and the results reflected the trial and error gropings of the organisers and the students. The narrow interviewing base, the difficulty of saying anything significant about issues from the results of one interview, the lack of good local background publications for 1938 (except newspapers), the variable quality of interviewees, the vagaries of cassette recorders were just some of the difficulties encountered along the way. In the end we did not insist on an in-depth treatment of issues facing men and women but encouraged students to make the best of their interview and readings, stressing the importance of analysis and interpretation.

The best of the results appear in the following pages. The first two have chosen to widen their treatment beyond the experience of their interviewees to deal with general educational and lifestyle issues of the time. The other three have focussed on the patterns of their subjects' lives and tried to set them against a backdrop of Newcastle work and society in 1938. For reasons of confidentiality, the names of interviewees have not been used.

The project requires still a great deal of work to improve the interview schedule, to provide manageable and relevant background readings, to prepare students for their encounters and to train them to knit interviews and research together into historical analysis. These things will be done in the years to come, for our results have encouraged us to think that such an exercise can be, with proper direction, a useful tool in learning an historian's skills. It remains an exercise for First Year students and we are aware that expectations should not be pitched too high. Nonetheless, the information and insights gathered so far will contribute to an accumulating body of research material in local history which will at the same time assist in the writing of the Bicentennial History volumes.

Peter Hempenstall  
Sheilah Gray  
Noel Rutherford  
Margaret Henry

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## ISOLATED, POOR, BUT HAPPY:

LIFE IN WEST WALLSEND 1938

by Marjorie White

Newcastle as a coal mining town, and later as an industrial city, had a predominantly working class population. In the late 1930's, as now, thousands of Newcastle women had to cope with having a shift-worker in the home. One theory advanced to explain why the abuse of analgesics is "quite markedly regional" in Newcastle, is that the strain and pressure of having a shift-worker in the family causes many women to resort to minor pain-killing preparations.<sup>1</sup>

Although the shift-worker caused a specific problem to those living in industrial towns, problems of Newcastle women were similar to the problems of other Australian women. Economic background caused a wide variety in the types of these problems. For example, in 1939 Jessie Street could argue: "The shortage of domestic workers brings untold hardship to many homes. It causes overstrain and ill-health to many mothers of families".<sup>2</sup> Obviously she was speaking of a woman who could afford to pay for domestic help. The woman interviewed, however, was, in 1938, so poor that her main problem was the very survival of her family. While acknowledging the wide variety of problems faced by women in the 1930's, this essay will concentrate on poverty and isolation, which were the dominant themes in the interview conducted. It must be kept in mind though, that what the writer might think a problem was not always a problem to the woman being written about.

Attitudes to women in 1938 were generally the same nationwide, and more patriarchal and sexist than they are today. The role of women was clearly defined. Females were expected to care for the home and family.<sup>3</sup> Donald Horne's mother was a typical example; her life was dominated by the family and the boredom of the kitchen sink.<sup>4</sup> Or again, "marriage was the crown and summit of one's expectations and women hoped to, and were expected to, marry";<sup>5</sup> and again, "Not even Miles Franklin and Marjorie Barnard, successful independent women though they were, could afford to be completely honest about their failure to marry".<sup>6</sup> Education and/or training for a career were often considered unnecessary and a waste of money. In 1940, 25.9% of the students at New South Wales's only university were female. Today there are six state universities, and at Sydney University alone 42.7% of the students are female.<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. P., the woman interviewed, was a girl, living in West Wallsend in 1938. West Wallsend had been a mining "boom" town at the beginning of the 20th Century but as the mines closed, had gradually declined. The steam train from Newcastle to West Wallsend was discontinued in 1930. An alternative transport, twice daily to Cockle Creek and then by rail to Newcastle, ceased soon afterwards. In the late thirties

"West Wallsend was very isolated".<sup>8</sup> In 1938 the district had a population of 5,000. Nearly all were miners or ex-miners and their families. Mining communities are known to feel hostility to others in different callings, and the smaller the community, and the more isolated it is, the stronger this feeling becomes.<sup>9</sup> Thus West Wallsend was doubly isolated by attitude and lack of transport. During the depression and afterwards, West Wallsend had one of the highest rates of unemployment in Australia. Joseph Littler, a tailoring manager of West Wallsend said: "At one time we had 670 on relief work" and "years ago, 93% had been unemployed".<sup>10</sup> The poverty of the people, and the isolation of the town, made it difficult to obtain employment. Littler was interested in the Young Citizen Movement which helped unemployed youth. He said, "I have paid the fares of boys and girls to go to Newcastle to interview employers. When they are asked where they live, and they say West Wallsend, the employer decides it is too far to travel, and they skip them over".<sup>11</sup>

Mrs. P.'s father had been unemployed since 1933, except for periodical relief work on the Mount Sugarloaf road. Her elder brother had been unemployed since leaving school six years before. He grew vegetables for the family, and the surplus was bartered with neighbours for other foodstuffs. He also looked after and milked the cow. In the summer he picked blackberries which grew around the abandoned mine shafts and in the bush. By "jumping the rattler" he was able to sell these ("for three pence a pannikin") at Sydney's Paddy's Markets. He had been on one of these trips in 1932 and had gone to see the Harbour Bridge opened. He was thus able to bring back the news of DeGroot's premature dash to cut the ribbon before Premier Lang. Mrs. P.'s boyfriend worked at the Forestry unemployed relief camp at Bulahdelah. He rode his bicycle sixty miles each Monday, and returned to West Wallsend on Friday.<sup>12</sup> Mrs. P.'s second brother was employed at Stewart & Lloyds at Mayfield. He also rode his bike to work - a distance of about thirteen miles. The hundreds of workers who converged on the industries at shift-time were known as "wheeled spiders".<sup>13</sup> As the only employed male in the family of seven, this brother aged 16, handed his entire pay packet to his mother each week. His exact wage is not remembered; however in 1939, "a metal process worker, assuming he commenced work at 14, would receive 15/6 per week and at 19 he would receive £3-3-6".<sup>14</sup>

The problems of a family living on dole relief and such a meagre wage must have affected the whole family, but especially the mother. She had to do all the domestic work, as well as cope with the severe psychological strain of continual poverty. The domestic work was heavy. A fuel stove, copper, and bath heater made house work unpleasant and inconvenient. Mrs. P.'s family were paying their house off by a weekly rental which was 8/-. Clothes were always "hand-me-downs". The family diet was good, and included home-grown eggs and poultry, milk, butter, and cream, fresh vegetables and home-baked bread. Sausages cost six pence a pound and T-bone steak cost 1/6 per pound. The butcher, who drove a horse and cart, and kept the flies away from the meat with a gum tree switch, called daily.

Mrs. P. had left school when she was 13 years of age; there appeared to have been a negative parental attitude to education.<sup>15</sup> According to Professor Turney, "a problem for isolated schools is the child's low motivation caused in general by lack of parental enthusiasm for education".<sup>16</sup> However there were more enthusiastic attitudes

towards education in other parts of Newcastle. The 1938 magazines of two girls schools speak glowingly of academic honours obtained in examinations by the pupils.<sup>17</sup>

According to records in 1939 there were 100-150 girls out of work in West Wallsend. "It was essential for a girl of 14 to earn her own living, otherwise her people had to keep her".<sup>18</sup> Mrs. P. was fortunate enough to find a job as a nurse-maid. She walked four miles to work arriving at 7 a.m. and leaving at 7 p.m. Eventually she saved enough money (by collecting bottles, and selling six for one penny) to buy a bicycle which gave her some measure of freedom on her rare time off duty. She had Sunday off each week. Her wages were 10/- weekly, which she handed to her mother. Long hours and low wages were common as there were no regulations governing such work. In 1939 Elizabeth Simmons, manageress of a women's employment agency said: "The domestic workers commenced work at 6.45 a.m. and had no approximate finishing time. After dinner they were expected to answer the door or telephone. They had one full day, starting at 10 a.m. off each week, and from Saturday after lunch until Sunday night off once a month". Mrs. Simmons also said "wages were not less than £1 a week".<sup>19</sup>

After working such long hours there was little time or inclination for stimulating intellectual activities. There were no daily papers or magazines in Mrs. P.'s home. She said simply: "we couldn't afford them". Light music and serials were listened to on the "wireless". There seemed to be no awareness of the outside world so that ignorance and isolation were almost complete. This does not mean that Mrs. P. felt deprived. In fact she feels that young people of today lack many advantages which she had when young.<sup>20</sup> The family relationship was warm and close-knit. When children, she and her sister used to play for hours in rather idyllic surroundings, "under wattle trees by a creek". They would dress up in discarded and well-worn finery and make up their faces with cast-off cosmetics from older friends. They entertained aunts and mother with family concerts. "The women in the family particularly loved the Sallies, and we spent all the time we could getting free entertainment at their concerts, harvest festivals, and any special dos."<sup>21</sup>

The Salvation Army had been active in the Newcastle and Coalfields district almost since the first arrival of Salvation Army officers in Australia in 1881. Apparently the Army was not always as favourably received in nearby Minmi as in West Wallsend. A report in the War Cry in the early eighties tells of a larrikin who knocked Captain Jenny Walker from a bridge in Minmi.<sup>22</sup> In 1890 the Sydney Mail had further news of the Army in the Coalfields, and stated, "Evan Williams, a miner from Minmi was forwarded to the Darlinghurst Receiving House this afternoon as a dangerous lunatic."<sup>23</sup> Two months ago he joined the Salvation Army and is now raving mad".

In Mrs. P.'s home her father was "boss", although her mother was obviously the "lynch-pin". There was always enough money for father to enjoy a few beers on Saturday night in one of West Wallsend's six pubs. This was a purely masculine activity. Anzac Day was also exclusively male and considered the second most important day of the year.<sup>24</sup>

Although Mrs. P. felt no sense of identity in West Wallsend, the neighbours' opinions were important to the family. Mrs. P. was deprived of a rare outing (a visit to a circus) because she had stood on the front verandah doing her hair with a fine comb. Her mother was scandalised, in case some passer-by might think she had head lice. Generally there was strict parental control, but the children did not rebel. Sex was never discussed in the home. Mrs. P. was aware that babies were born out of wedlock, and that girls did have abortions, but subjects such as these were taboo. Marriage was considered the goal of every "decent" young woman.

While analysing the problems of a woman such as Mrs. P. it became clear that many problems were caused by isolation and poverty. These caused, or complemented, other problems such as the "village pump mentality", unemployment, a lack of awareness of the outside world and lack of intellectual stimulation. In 1938, when the world was on the brink of a holocaust, it was as if the West Wallsend people considered they were on a different planet. The grim task of survival occupied the thoughts and time of most "Westy" inhabitants, and they were unable to break the vicious circle of poverty-isolation. They knew very little about any other life-style and were moderately content and even happy if they had the basic necessities of a roof over their heads and a full stomach.

A stagnant attitude, and authoritarian conformity to women's traditional roles determined and restricted what any woman could achieve. For Mrs. P., a negative opinion and lack of knowledge about how education could help her obtain a better job really didn't matter. Even if she had been motivated, her extreme poverty meant that control of her future was impossible.

However, to end on this note of gloom would present an unbalanced picture. During the war the conformity about woman's role was relaxed, and Mrs. P. realised what she could achieve. Today she is a successful, self-made woman, respected, attractive, very shrewd and compassionate. Forty-two years later she has been married twice, is a mother and grandmother, and looks back with great affection and nostalgia on her girlhood in West Wallsend.

FOOTNOTES

1. R. Nanra and J.M. Duggan, Analgesic Addiction of a Nation, Canberra, 1971, p.61.
2. The Unemployment of Youth in Industry. Report to Legislative Council, Sydney, p.107.
3. A. Summers, Damned Whores and God's Police, Penguin Books, 1980, pp.31-34.
4. D. Horne, Education of Young Donald, Penguin, 1975, pp.32-33.
5. B. Kingston, My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann, Melbourne, 1975, p.6.
6. ibid., p.118.
7. Bygolt, 'Women in the University of Sydney', Sydney University Gazette, 1980, p.16.
8. Back to Westy, Booklet, Newcastle, 1963.
9. F.R.E. Mauldon, A Study in Social Economics, The Hunter River Valley, N.S.W., Melbourne, 1927, p.195.
10. The Unemployment of Youth in Industry, op.cit., p.190.
11. ibid.
12. Interview.
13. P. Haslam, 'Notes on Newcastle in 1938', Newcastle University Archives.
14. The Unemployment of Youth, op.cit., p.56.
15. Interview.
16. Professor of Dept. of Education in Sydney University Gazette, op.cit., p.6.
17. The Mitre, The Nobbies, School Magazines of Girls Grammar and Girls High Schools, 1938.
18. The Unemployment of Youth in Industry, op.cit., p.107.
19. ibid., p.33.
20. Interview.
21. Interview.
22. B. Bolton, Booth's Drum, Sydney, 1980, p.72.
23. ibid., p.47.
24. Interview.

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