



**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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## LIBERAL OR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION:

### •A GULF IN NEWCASTLE IN 1938

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by Veronica Lunn

Dr. Lang had prophesised in 1875 that Newcastle would become the principal seat of the manufacturing industry.<sup>1</sup> Inherent in the transition from "coal town to steel city",<sup>2</sup> was a rapid and concentrated expansion in the industrial sector and a population increase which by 1938 registered 115,600 residents.<sup>3</sup> Within twenty years of commencing operations in the area, the workforce of the B.H.P. and associated industries had risen from 1,500 to 5,000 employees.<sup>4</sup> The working class was increasingly becoming an industrial proletariat and the impact on facilities for educational and cultural enrichment was determined by environmental factors and the priorities imposed to foster the industrial centre.

The adult's perception of the world is conditioned by the access to information and the ability to assimilate it. The quality of formal education is an elementary factor in this process, however support for education beyond the primary years was not evident prior to 1940. There was a tendency amongst the working class to distrust the educated man; the universities were deemed "playgrounds of the rich".<sup>5</sup> This anti-intellectualism, which was basically class oriented, was a significant obstacle in the development of secondary and university education. In 1938, only 19.6% of N.S.W. pupils were obtaining post primary education<sup>6</sup> and only 25% of those who sat for the Intermediate Certificate continued their education to obtain a Leaving Certificate.<sup>7</sup> The low priority determined by the Department of Education in 1937, was implicit in the meagre budget provision of 10% of total education expenditure for secondary schooling.<sup>8</sup> There was a general assumption that pupils would leave school at fourteen or fifteen years of age and a prevailing attitude that females, in particular, did not finish their education.<sup>9</sup> Mendelsohn asserts that "education up to 1939 was felt to be wasted on girls",<sup>10</sup> and the general perception of education for the working class was implicit in the Sydney Morning Herald's opposition to "over-educating the rank and file".<sup>11</sup> A move to follow Victoria's lead and substantially increase secondary school fees was only narrowly defeated.<sup>12</sup>

The majority of adults in 1938 would have been subject to a utilitarian school curriculum which favoured a vocational syllabus and engendered specialisation at an early age. School attendance was compulsory between seven and fourteen years and primary school courses diverged into either superior primary schools or secondary education. The regulations of 1911 had divided Superior Public Schools into technical, domestic science and commercial education facilities.<sup>13</sup> By 1937 there were only 160 high schools in N.S.W., yet 487 superior schools.<sup>14</sup> Wickham Superior Public School, for example, had been established in 1878 and from 1913 combined a limited post primary education with domestic and commercial training for girls.<sup>15</sup> A former pupil recalls the restrictions of a stratified curriculum, "There were only two things a girl could do... either a commercial course or domestic studies".<sup>16</sup> Newcastle Central

School had been established with the object of centralising super-primary education in Newcastle,<sup>17</sup> and there was a movement towards comprehensive courses, which culminated in the conversion of many superior schools to high schools.<sup>18</sup> However, the significant point is that the pre-vocational emphasis in the curriculum precluded access to comprehensive and liberal education for students with limited financial support.

Mendelsohn proposes that "technical education was for the scholastically (and socially) inferior, the intellectually able...streamed to selective high schools whose courses were heavily influenced by university requirements".<sup>19</sup> In the same way that class allegiance could be indicated by residence in certain suburbs,<sup>20</sup> pursuit of educational options provided a fairly accurate index of status. Albeit a Labor dominated community, it is perhaps not too surprising to learn, that of a class of thirty students at Newcastle Girls High in 1932, only one Labor supporter could be found.<sup>21</sup> Educators, in particular, recognised the need for revision of a syllabus which had not been altered since 1925.<sup>22</sup> During 1938 branches of the New Education Fellowship were formed in each state and Newcastle hosted a conference in October of that year, designed to draw attention to the severe deficiencies in the education structure.<sup>23</sup>

The distinction between liberal and vocational education became more prominent in the area of tertiary studies. Frank Tate, who was president of the Australian Council for Educational Research in the late 1930s, highlighted the inequities between liberal and technical education. He drew attention to the general view that only a modicum of general education was required by working class children. There was a polarisation between the pure knowledge taught at universities and the applied science and practical skills offered at the Technical Colleges. Most significantly, he perceived industrialisation to be an influence hindering education.<sup>24</sup>

The first technical classes in Newcastle were established and accommodated in the Newcastle School of Arts in 1877. The Wood Street site was occupied in 1896 with the trades school opening in 1919, to cater for over one thousand students within a decade.<sup>25</sup> There had always been a close link between industry and technical education in Newcastle. In 1933 the State Government had appointed a Royal Commission to enquire into the state of technical education and a Newcastle Advisory Committee was inaugurated in 1936.<sup>26</sup> Within the context of the provision of educational opportunities and the priorities asserted for the Newcastle region, it is extremely relevant that the committee was strongly representative of the views of the B.H.P., which was calling for the reform of technical education.<sup>27</sup> The new Technical College to evolve was opened in 1938 by the Chairman of Directors of the B.H.P., Mr. H.G. Darling, who asserted, "If there is one spot in Australia that stands out as suitable for the expansion of technical education, it is Newcastle".<sup>28</sup>

Technical College fees amounted to approximately five shillings per term; however the cost of securing a university degree was prohibitive. Tuition for an Arts degree in 1938 would have cost in the vicinity of eighty pounds and a Medical degree could rise as high as two hundred and sixty pounds, which would have exceeded the average annual income of many workers. There were only two hundred free places at the Sydney University and text book; accommodation and living costs presented further obstacles.<sup>29</sup> The majority of students attended university



because their parents could afford to buy them a career: "Unless you had a scholarship you had no way of getting to university...there were very few scholarships and you had to be brilliant".<sup>30</sup> In 1937, of about three thousand students at Sydney University only six hundred and eighteen were women.<sup>31</sup> The expectation, however, for higher education for females was not high: "There were very few women at university...we took limited opportunity as a matter of course".<sup>32</sup> Operating on a shoe string budget, the university was marked by conservatism and lack of diversity.<sup>33</sup>

Interest had been expressed for the provision of a university in Newcastle in the nineteen thirties. The Rotary Club listed as one of its achievements between 1935 and 1937, the move to set aside one hundred and seven acres at Mayfield West for a university and park.<sup>34</sup> Although Armidale had obtained a rural university, suggestions that Newcastle be similarly endowed lacked general public support. An accusation of parochialism was levelled at proponents by the Registrar of Sydney University.<sup>35</sup> So Newcastle had to wait for a university which, symbolically, came to be housed under the umbrella of the Technical College. Similarly, provision for teacher training was not attained until 1949. Although scholarships of forty pounds were offered for Sydney Teachers' College,<sup>36</sup> the distance, accommodation and living costs implied real sacrifices for families of limited means.<sup>37</sup>

When the Public Instruction Act came into force there were twenty-four evening colleges in N.S.W.,<sup>38</sup> of which Newcastle provided eleven.<sup>39</sup> However, by the nineteen hundreds only the Hamilton Evening College remained, which provided domestic and commercial courses until 1937 and specialised in business studies from 1938.<sup>40</sup> It also offered limited tuition for students to obtain Intermediate and Leaving Certificates. Commercial courses were similarly available from Newcastle Business College, Ell's Business College and the Northern Business College.<sup>41</sup> Continuation schools had been established in Newcastle from 1911, offering an evening version of the superior school syllabus for working students who had achieved the Qualifying Certificate on completion of primary schooling. However, after a boost in the early depression years, they were showing signs of decline by 1934 and were to be discontinued after the war.<sup>42</sup>

That "there were very few places in Newcastle where people could expand themselves mentally"<sup>43</sup> would seem to be a succinct assessment of educational and cultural opportunities available in the pre-war years. A movement whose philosophy implied universal education and the "unition of the two streams of labour and scholarship",<sup>44</sup> might have appeared the panacea. The Workers' Educational Association had been founded in England in 1903 and transferred to Australia through the initiative of David Stewart and Peter Board. Sydney University had been operating an extension facility, but was persuaded to share in the administration and costs of tutorial classes for the movement. The Newcastle Northern District Branch, No. 1, was formed in Newcastle in 1914<sup>45</sup> and by 1938 was operating fourteen tutorial classes.<sup>46</sup> The principal subjects offered were Industrial History, Economics, Political Science and Sociology. A Psychology class was also meeting in Newcastle in 1938, and a student recalls that half of those enrolled were women, primarily married and of comfortable circumstances.<sup>47</sup> Higgins commented on the prevalence of middle class workers connected with the association between the war years. That the passion for education was not evident among the working class, he attributed to the workers' fear of being "seduced from

their responsibilities in the class struggle".<sup>48</sup> Despite the affiliation of the Newcastle Labour Council and nine unions, Mauldon was similarly critical of the paralysis and indifference with which the local movement had to contend.<sup>49</sup> Another associate of the Newcastle group, G.V. Portus, attributed much of the failure to academic snobbery relating to extra mural classes. He lamented that "neither the stalwarts of the W.E.A. or the apostles of so called pure working class education have been able to evoke anything like the interest in education they confidently prophesied".<sup>50</sup> The movement had certainly lost much ground with the working class in the dispute over the pro-conscription attitude of its 1914 Director, Meredith Atkinson.<sup>51</sup> So, despite criticism of disinterest in worker's education, the Trade Union movement remained sceptical of the W.E.A.'s asserted role, as the educational arm of the labour movement.<sup>52</sup>

It was observed in 1939, that "Australia is suffering from cultural emaciation"<sup>53</sup> and it was becoming evident that the industrial and commercial development of Newcastle had not been matched by the provision of cultural amenities. The Headmistress of Newcastle Girls High attributed the dearth of facilities to "the narrow views on education"<sup>54</sup> and a few concerned citizens were beginning to agitate for reform: "We wanted a university, public libraries and an art gallery in the nineteen thirties".<sup>55</sup> Although an Academy of Music had been established and music and choral societies existed, local facilities for music appreciation were limited to the productions of Mrs Hannell, amateur social groups and eisteddfods.<sup>56</sup> Newcastle depended primarily on visiting performances, such as the tenors Tauber and Chostiakoff.<sup>57</sup> The Newcastle Morning Herald had drawn attention in 1936 to the destructive influence of the Hollywood dream factory on live theatre and noted local agitation for a Little Theatre.<sup>58</sup> However it was not until 1939 that the Newcastle Dramatic Art Club was realised.<sup>59</sup> The Rotary Club provided the nucleus of the Cultural Centre Committee<sup>60</sup> and received valuable media support: "If sufficient local interest is enlisted it should be possible for Newcastle to establish an excellent gallery".<sup>61</sup> A plan was provided in August 1936 for a building opposite the Town Hall, to house a free public library, reading rooms, a lecture hall, a theatre and an art gallery, at an estimated cost of fifty-eight thousand pounds.<sup>62</sup> Despite the financial support offered by the Carnegie Corporation, negotiations were prolonged and had to be deferred with the onset of the war.

Cunningham proposes that: "In the search for indices of cultural advancement...the social historian is likely to give weight to the availability and use of books freely available to the public".<sup>63</sup> In an investigation of library services, conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research in 1934, Munn and Pitt reported severe deficiencies. They drew attention to the fact that Australians were better provided with library facilities in the late nineteenth century than they were in the nineteen thirties. They were particularly critical of the provision of services in Newcastle.<sup>64</sup> Limited access to reading material was available through subscription shop libraries and the Sydney Country Lending Library.<sup>65</sup> The Newcastle Business and Professional Women's Club had established the Hazel Ostler children's library in the Town Hall in 1934<sup>66</sup> and a few schools provided library services. Perhaps the best endowed of these would have been Newcastle Girls High School which housed three hundred books per hundred students in 1938.<sup>67</sup>

The Newcastle School of Arts, which had been operating since 1861, was inspected by Munn and Pitt in 1934. They reported a total collection of 265,000 volumes, of which ninety-five percent were ephemeral fiction and "such serious books as are offered are so out of date as to be practically worthless".<sup>68</sup> The control of the institution was vested in a central committee and a subscription of one pound per year was levied. As the facility was reaching only two percent of the population, a rate-supported municipal library using the existing School of Arts as the nucleus was recommended. The librarian felt that "consciousness of the serious need in Newcastle for a free public library had been awakened" and the Free Public Library Movement, which was inaugurated in Newcastle in 1937, embarked upon a vigorous promotion campaign.<sup>69</sup> Addresses to groups such as the Business and Professional Women's Club<sup>70</sup> emphasised the philosophy of the movement and slide publicity in picture theatres and media advertising attempted to enlist general public support.

Newcastle Council appointed a subcommittee to assess the validity of a cultural centre and a free library service in 1938, and it was decided to adopt in principle the establishment of such a service. The enthusiasm of Alderman Griffiths was evident in the conferences held with the Minister for Education and officers of the movement.<sup>71</sup> The Library Act of 1939 was in essence an enabling act, offering local bodies a subsidy on a pound for pound basis on adoption.<sup>72</sup> By 1938 the Newcastle Council had adopted the concept of free library service, the only obstacle being the refusal of the School of Arts Committee to combine assets. The executive council of the Free Public Library Movement in Sydney, depicted Newcastle as a pioneer in the provision of modern public library services in Australia.<sup>73</sup> However, the stimulus for cultural reform in the area came from a vocal minority of middle class orientation, and not from the labour movement.

The media was another pervasive force in the transmission of information. Of twenty large daily newspapers in the nineteen thirties, there were only twelve independent owners<sup>74</sup> and local pride in the Newcastle Morning Herald as a source of impartial and valid information, was evident: "It had a name for having a very fair editorial and was always very well regarded...it had a great deal of local content... it was the most important paper in the house".<sup>75</sup> Similarly, the family life revolved around the wireless as a primary access point of information and entertainment. Cultural amenities were augmented through programmes presented on the infant relay station 2NC, but the community approach, popular music, soap operas and labour links rendered 2HD the most popular station.<sup>76</sup> Thus "that Australians were generally well informed on matters relating to foreign affairs prior to the outbreak of war",<sup>77</sup> would have undoubtedly been due to the influence of the media.

The facility to secure information on matters relating to personal and community health was a vital aspect in the education process. Access to information relating to women's health problems was severely limited. There were few women doctors and male doctors were generally not consulted for complaints of a personal nature. There was a paucity of information exchange relating to sexual functions and problems, which had serious ramifications for the adolescent. Formal sex education in the school curriculum was non-existent, the media tended to depict the romantic image solely, and parents generally exercised censorship over alternate avenues of enlightenment.<sup>78</sup> An insight into the problems of maturing in such an environment:

There was a great deal of confusion about sex....  
my grandmother said no woman should know anything about  
sex until she was married....People would lie to you....  
I was eighteen and still thought the baby came out of  
the navel. There was no way of knowing anything  
except things you would pick up.<sup>79</sup>

Perceptions of members of the professions were to a large extent conditioned by class orientation. Doctors were highly regarded socially, yet "there was a tendency to like your own doctor but dislike the profession as a whole".<sup>80</sup> The polarisation and the public impression that "they were too hidebound",<sup>81</sup> was seen in the contention over Elizabeth Kenny's method of treating poliomyelitis victims. There had been five epidemics between 1925 and 1931,<sup>82</sup> and 544 cases were admitted to Newcastle hospital in 1938.<sup>83</sup> Community concern and a pro-Kenny interest, fostered by her visit to Newcastle in June 1938, were manifested in the media. There was a dichotomy between the clinic's "spirit of hope" and the "permanent opposition amongst medical men to any new theory".<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth Kenny reflected, "for nearly thirty years I had endeavoured (but) ...the medical world of Australia tenaciously adhered to traditional theory".<sup>85</sup> The Newcastle Kenny clinic, situated at Coutt's Memorial Home, treated about 75 patients daily in 1938.<sup>86</sup> Community support and press coverage of positive results fostered a resentment against the intransigent elements of the medical profession.

Docherty suggests that limited patronage of the baby health clinics, in their formative years in Newcastle, could be attributed to a working class suspicion of the clinics as centres of middle class values.<sup>87</sup> This factor was similarly evident in their attitude to facilities for higher education and their perception of those who had the means to enjoy it. Deficiencies in cultural stimulation and the emphasis on vocational education were not only imposed to meet the needs of the industrial city, but self-generated by class expectation and perceptions.

FOOTNOTES

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15. J. Fletcher and T. Burnswoods, Government Schools in N.S.W. 1848-1976, Sydney 1977, p.17.
16. Interview, tape 3:1, 126.
17. City of Newcastle, (n.p.) Newcastle 1929.
18. J. Fletcher, op.cit.
19. R. Mendelsohn, op.cit., p.304.
20. Interview, tape 3:1, 400, see also D. Jeans and P. Spearritt, The Open Air Museum, Sydney 1980, p.92.
21. Interview, tape 1:2, 491.
22. Maitland Boys High, The Magpie, November 1938, p.1.
23. A. Barcan, op.cit., p.37.
24. J.D. Anchen, Frank Tate and His Work for Education, Melbourne 1956, p.128.
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29. O.Y.B.N.S.W. 1939, p.271.
30. Interview, tape 3:2, 506.
31. O.Y.B.N.S.W. 1939, p.272.
32. Interview, tape 3:2, 506.
33. P.H. Partridge, op.cit., p.42.
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42. J. Fletcher, op.cit., p.98.
43. Interview, tape 3:4, 400.
44. The Hunter River Highway, September 1930, vol.1, no.4.
45. E.M. Higgins, David Stewart and the W.E.A., Sydney 1953, p.34.
46. O.Y.B.N.S.W. 1939, p.281.
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48. E.M. Higgins, op.cit., p.24.
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