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STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS

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PREFACE

The 1983 issue of Student Research Papers brings to a close the series of good first year history essays on life and work in Newcastle in 1938. For the past three years, as part of the department's involvement with the 1938 volume of the Bicentennial History Project, we have been training selected students in interviewing techniques and documentary research methods with a view to building up a mosaic of impressions about the social history of this area during the 1930s. The project has resulted in nearly 100 interviews on life in 1938 for the National Oral History Project, a chapter on unemployment in Australia for the forthcoming Bicentennial History, this series of published student research papers and a larger array of unpublished essays and surveys by students of this department and of the neighbouring C.A.E.

We have adopted the practice of publishing only the best local history essays each year. The group of selected students in 1983 was smaller than in previous years and, given our group method of proceeding with the project, the range of work we were able to achieve was somewhat circumscribed. Nevertheless the three papers of this issue provide information which helps to build up the pattern of social life we have been exploring during the last three years.

The papers by Doyle and Trim both deal with the lives of men who were involved in coal-mining in the Newcastle area in 1938, and show to some extent the impact coalmining had on the whole family. In contrast Munro's paper is based on an interview with an architect who left Australia to gain experience in England and Europe before returning to Newcastle to practise in 1937.

The 1938 project is now completed. Because of staff shortages we have decided not to mount a similar project in 1984 but to use the year to review the success or otherwise of this series. For it is important to emphasize that the essays issuing from this local history research have been training exercises largely for first year students and it is time to assess whether they have been effective teaching exercises. We expect to be back in 1985 with a new series of Student Research Papers to continue what we hope is a useful instrument in reconstructing part of the Australian past.

Sheilah Gray
Peter Hempenstall
Margaret Henry

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"Moderne - Come Back to Earth!" : A View of an Architect
and Architecture in Newcastle in 1938

by Paul Munro

In the official souvenir programme "150 Years in Australia", published for the sesqui-centenary in 1938, the Premier of New South Wales, B.S.B. Stevens, wrote, "In 1938, Australia will celebrate the achievement of its first one hundred and fifty years since Phillip. Our mines and our factories yield an increasing quota of wealth, while from the fertile hinterland the products of the soil pour overseas in a ceaseless stream to feed and clothe the peoples of older lands".¹ One is left with the impression that Australia had been booming and continued to boom yet, in Newcastle at least, the depression had not yet finished. Workers in Newcastle in 1938 were faced with conditions not very different from those which had existed for the preceding decade. Mr G, an architect, had recently returned home from England to "start again".² This paper seeks to outline some of the issues he faced at that time and the difficulties he had in re-establishing himself in the workplace.

Mr G's impressions are quite valuable as he had returned from England and Europe in 1937, a time when many developments in architecture had been taking place in Europe. First, an overview of Newcastle at that time. It is difficult to put a date on the end of the depression. Wendy Lowenstein suggests that you don't know just when it started or when it ended - only when it was over for you!³ The most reliable figures available show unemployment in the last quarter of 1939 and unemployment in the first quarter of 1929 as being equal at 9.3 percent.⁴ Even so figures for 1938 were showing a marked improvement on previous years.⁵ Newcastle at this time was still on the road to recovery. The working class in particular was still having a hard time making ends meet and even though things did not appear to be getting better, they were, but very slowly.⁶

Mr G was educated in Newcastle and having completed his "qualifying certificate" he decided to go into architecture. His father was an engineer which may have helped him to secure a position for his son with a local firm of architects. Mr G tells the story of the then organist in Newcastle Cathedral offering him advice and recommending that he go to speak with a certain firm of architects for advice. Mr G worked with this firm as a student for a number of years, gained his articles and became an associate architect in 1923. In 1929 he became a Fellow of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. About 1923 Mr G went into practice on his own. He continued in this practice until 1929 when he decided to go to England with a contingent of Boy Scouts. Mr G had been active in the Boy Scout Movement at this time and accompanied the Australian contingent as a member of staff. He thought that it would do him good to go overseas and he decided before his departure that he would stay on in England and seek work. He gained employment with a firm of prominent London architects. This firm specialised in the design and construction of cinemas and theatres. The firm did not confine its activities to England but also became involved in the construction of cinemas throughout parts of Europe. It was during this period that Mr G gained first hand knowledge of the "new" architectural movements (such as the International Style) that were growing during the early to mid 1930's.

While Mr G had been overseas his practice had remained in limbo and on his return he virtually took up where he had left off. He had been well known to the Newcastle community before his departure and therefore

it was not as if he was setting up a practice for the first time in an unknown locality. Many people were curious to see what he had learned while away, several interesting commissions resulted, and several examples of International style dwellings were built in Newcastle.

One of the first comments made by Mr G about the depression was that it was worse in Australia than it had been in England. The table supplied in Lowenstein⁸ compares unemployment in seven countries during the depression. Both Australia and the United Kingdom had peak unemployment in 1932. The five year average percentage showed Australia at 28.1% (23.4%) and the United Kingdom at 22.1% (19.2% average). Using this data Australia seemed worse off during the period 1930-1934. By Australian standards Newcastle lagged behind in recovery which perhaps prompted Mr G's comment. Also this comment may be influenced by the fact that in London Mr G had been in the employ of a large firm of architects whereas on his return to Australia he had to seek out clients himself for his work to continue. He said that it was not easy to find work initially though other architects had provided encouragement. He had gained publicity in the local press and perhaps some people thought, "Mr G's back, we'd better give him a job"¹⁰ From this point Mr G said that he survived alright and "got some jobs".¹⁰ These jobs were obviously enough to support his family.

Mr G saw the conditions in Newcastle in the field of architecture as being difficult yet he was able to exist in his practice and did not have to merge with another firm of architects. Conditions of work at that time were "not too bad", as Mr G remembers. Of course one must consider that by virtue of his practice Mr G had the opportunity to regulate conditions anyway. He had a draughtsman assisting him and they both worked basically nine to five, five days a week. In reality he worked much longer hours, returning to the office after dinner to complete a job and working weekends. Mr G said that he always paid his staff and adhered to conditions set out in the relevant awards and determinations laid down at the time. Two weeks holiday were allowed each year. Before the World War 2 it was much easier to gain co-operation from builders, and works were usually completed on time because of the shortage of work within the building industry. Lowenstein makes several references to the fact that builders often undercut each other fiercely and that award rates were rarely paid because of the availability of tradesmen and labourers.¹¹ Given the length of the depression in Newcastle this condition still applied in 1937-38, and obviously the cutting of contracts would extend to architects as well.

During the interview I asked Mr G whether he was aware of any government financed public works that had taken place in Newcastle from 1937 to 1939. He said that a lot of unemployed people were used to make new cement roads and streets during that period. He also said that unemployed people were used to maintain public buildings such as the painting of the Ocean Baths. The types of public works undertaken at that time depended upon the organising body, state or local government. These "relief works" were designed to employ the largest number of men possible. Municipal bodies were encouraged to promote schemes which would normally have been financed by loans. The co-operative councils were usually given a grant equal to the amount loaned. The works undertaken included road construction, municipal buildings, sale-yards,¹² electric lighting extensions, swimming baths and surfing accommodation.¹² Works of this nature were undertaken in Newcastle though they gave little work to local architects.

Mr G seems to have received quite a lot of support from his professional peers on his return to Newcastle. The fact that he and his family had been well known in the Newcastle community before going abroad assisted on his return to the Newcastle professional arena. Mr G is a

member and past president of the Newcastle Businessmen's Club as well as being a member of other service organisations. He seems to have taken part in many business, social and cultural activities that occurred in Newcastle. He spoke of travelling exhibitions, concerts and displays and as well he attended Sydney social gatherings. Mauldon pointed out that people in Newcastle in commercial and professional pursuits lacked a corporate outlook.¹³ Perhaps this was true at the time of Mauldon's writing but by 1938 changes had taken place which point to the non-wage earning class becoming more and more assimilated and beginning to become involved in the development of cultural activities and social service within Newcastle. In 1938 activities set down to celebrate 150 years in Australia ran for the whole month of February in Newcastle and included such activities as band championships, golf tournaments, processions, pageants, surf carnivals, exhibitions, congresses, balls, dinner and sports carnivals.¹⁴ The community had organised itself on a cultural level at least by this time. Docherty claims that as a consequence of the lack of local control over the city's economy, and profits being directed away from Newcastle, these conditions have bred a strong tradition of self-help in Newcastle.¹⁵ Certainly by 1938 it appears that co-operation between community leaders and industrial workers did exist. Indeed by 1947 the community was proud of its community ties and its self-help in the proposed building of a cultural centre, "a gift from the citizens of their city".¹⁶

It became quite clear that Mr G and family were never poorly off and this is perhaps why to them the depression period both in England and in Australia does not seem radically different from any other period. The fact that people who were not themselves unemployed tended to ignore or dismiss the unemployed and their related problems is borne out in many of the interviews contained in "Weevils in the Flour".¹⁷ Mr G had always had a car; before he went to England, in London and again on his return to Newcastle. The car has long been an indicator of the standard of living. Certainly an imported expensive English car would indicate a higher standard of living. Car ownership in the late 1930's had barely passed the 1929 level in Australia.¹⁸

The architecture of Newcastle during the mid to late 1930's was not at all characteristic of the approach to architecture in Newcastle before that period or since. Generally the architectural styles used had been very traditional, conservative and almost backward. Then during the late 1930's a spate of almost avant-garde buildings appear. They were mainly constructed in the International or Art Deco styles. Rosemary Auchmuty points out the backward looking architecture up to this period and gives examples of the offices of the Newcastle Herald in Bolton Street (1929) and Tyrrell House in Zara Street (1925) as being not recognisably interwar but harking back to an earlier age.²⁰ This seems to be the attitude taken by many local architects. Mr G agrees because when questioned as to his attitude to the moderne or art deco styles; his reply was that he didn't like it and that they "should come back to earth".²¹

Mr G's reaction to Nesca House, Newcastle's best example of international style, was "it's alright".²² Nesca House was designed by Emil Sodersten, a leading Australian architect, in association with local architects, Pitt and Merewether. Construction was completed in 1939. Nesca House had been a try out of one of the modern European styles that Sodersten had experienced while overseas in 1935.²³ This building is classified by the National Trust and its preservation is felt to be essential.²⁴ The other surprising piece of architecture in Newcastle is the City of Newcastle incinerator in Parry Street. The incinerator was designed by Mr. F.A. Scorer, a Newcastle architect and won the Sir John Sulman Award in 1938.²⁵ Many of the buildings that were viewed as being avant-garde at the time were designed by architects from

outside Newcastle. Therefore this award was indeed an honour for a Newcastle architect as the award was made for buildings throughout Australia. The Edgeworth David Building at the Technical College, Tighes Hill, designed by the State Government Architect and opened in September 1938 was also nominated for the Sulman Award but at a later date.²⁶ Another surprising building is Peter Gannon's Nurses' Home at the Mater Misericordiae Hospital, Waratah. This building has very beautiful art deco features and was built in 1939.²⁷

Many buildings undertaken during the thirties were quite innovative in design and reflected the art deco style. This was a departure from the traditional and staid architectural style usually found in Newcastle. Perhaps the finest example of art deco in Newcastle is the Great Northern Hotel in Scott Street. Other examples include the Royal cinema in Hunter Street and the CML building also in Hunter Street. The dominant domestic style during the twenties and thirties was the Californian bungalow. Blocks of flats in Newcastle tended to be the exception rather than the rule. Those flats built tended to be two storied and contained few flats. The exception is Segenhoe, Wolfe Street, one of the only large blocks of flats built during that period outside Sydney.²⁸

For Newcastle the late thirties had brought great change in style during a period when few buildings were undertaken. The acceptance of these changes helped to attain the maturation of Newcastle as the second city; an effect that was not recognised until the post Second World War period.

For Mr G the late thirties meant a return home, a picking up where he had left off seven years before. It did not seem that he had suffered greatly during the depression years. He remembers most of the time with enthusiasm, particularly the time that he spent overseas. If anything he had escaped the depression virtually unharmed. He had acquired many skills while overseas though he appears to have not had the opportunity to use them.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cited in O.L. Zeigler, Souvenir and Programme for the National Celebrations 1938-150 Years in Australia, Sydney 1937, Forword.
2. Interview tape, side 1, count 0411.
3. W. Lowenstein, Weevils in the Flour - An oral record of the 1930's depression in Australia, Melbourne 1978, p.1.
4. Ibid, pp.12-13.
5. Ibid.
6. Student Research Papers in Australian History, No.7, 1982, p.20.
7. Interview tape, side 1, count 058.
8. W. Lowenstein, Weevils, p.15.
9. Interview tape, side 1, count 0349.
10. Interview tape, side 1, count 0343.
11. W. Lowenstein, Weevils, p.27 and pp.246-7.
12. L.J. Louis & I. Turner (eds), The Depression of the 1930's, Stanmore 1968, pp.105-6.
13. F.R.E.Mauldon, A Study in Social Economics: the Hunter River Valley of New South Wales, Melbourne 1927, p.196.
14. O.L. Zeigler, 150 Years, Newcastle Programme section.
15. J.C. Docherty, The Second City: Social and Urban Change in Newcastle, New South Wales, 1900-1929, Ph.D. thesis, ANU, 1977, p.282.
16. E.K. Lingard (ed), Newcastle - 150 Years, Sydney 1947, p.28.
17. W. Lowenstein, Weevils, p.7.
18. M.Bencznic, et al., "A Window on Life in the late 1930's", 1938 Bicentennial History Bulletin, p.55.
19. P.Spearritt, Sydney Since the Twenties, Sydney 1978, p.78.
20. R. Auchmuty, "City Building in Newcastle in the Interwar Years", 1938 Bicentennial History Bulletin, p.37.
21. Interview tape, side 2, count 0404.
22. Interview tape, side 2, count 0381.
23. H. Tanner (ed), Architects of Australia, Macmillan, Sydney 1981, p.127.
24. National Trust Classification Proposal - Nesca House, 1981.
25. "The Sir John Sulman Award - 1938", Architecture, December 1939, pp.242-3.
26. "Nominations for the Sulman Award - 1940", Architecture, Autumn, 1940.
27. R.Auchmuty, "City Building", p.42.
28. R.Auchmuty, "City Building", p.44.

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