

## **History? You must be joking.**

**Abstract: This is the title of the fifth annual History Lecture of the History Council of New South Wales, given at Government House, Sydney, on the evening of the 29th June by Dr Shirley Fitzgerald, the City Historian for the City of Sydney. Dr Fitzgerald has published many books on the history of the city, and in this lecture she addressed the issue of why we should be bothered with history. Is it just for interest, or for entertainment, or does it actually have some importance for our present lives?**

This is one of a series of annual lectures organised by the NSW History Council. All lectures in this series are published as monographs and are available for purchase from the NSW History Council, PO Box 538, Sydney, NSW 2031.

This lecture is supposed to be about the state of history. Here in NSW there *are* positive things we can point to.

The present Carr Government's insistence on increasing the role of history teaching in our schools. The revival of interest in the teaching of civics and citizenship. The Premier's History Awards are the envy of the profession elsewhere. We can point to the creation of the History Council itself - a first in Australia in bringing together under one umbrella historians and institutions where history is practiced, from the academy, to museums, to government and on to the level of the local historical society.

We could even take time to enumerate the ways in which historians have contributed to the national debate. Professor Stuart Macintyre observed in a recent article 'historical debate is high profiled and tends to bear directly on public attitudes as well as government policy. This country has used history to scour its soul, most pointedly in its relationship with Aboriginal Australia'.(1)

But, apart from indigenous issues, I'm inclined to ask, what else?? And even in the case of indigenous issues, I think this overstates the reality, notwithstanding the enormous good will that was symbolised by the May bridge walk in Sydney and later in other cities. I think that in many places, in relation to both Indigenous and multi-cultural Australia, very little scouring has gone on.

We will all recall Senator Herron's now infamous speech when he denied the stolen generations, relying on a 10% statistical measure of grief and loss that insulted every Australian in its articulation.(2) But what got to me about Herron's words was not so much the insensitivity of the denial – after all the current national government has been in denial all along – but the next bit where he went on to say that much of what really happened could not be known because it was 'lost in the mists of time.' I thought, as I'm sure many of you thought when you heard it, 'I don't believe he just said that. And I was pleased that the ABC's 7.30 Report responded quickly by interviewing Peter Read, an historian who had worked on the 'Bringing them Home' document. Peter quietly and methodically punched a few holes in the veil of the mists of time with the historical detail. The official voice had not disappeared into the mist, and clearly its intent had not always been benign.

But while my reaction had been to be angry with the Minister, the response of an Aboriginal colleague was quite different. She just took the Minister's superficiality for granted, but honed in on the issue of the audience for Read. What's the point, she said, if it was only on the ABC?

Well, who *do* we reach? What *is* the point of history? What *do* we think we are doing? More importantly what do we think we are doing *now*?

Now. It is never easy to define....

According to the rhetoric of now, everything is new. New millennium. New technology. New market. New economy. The new idea is valued, old wisdom is recast as irrelevant.

If you listen to the radio or read the papers, the word 'history' is used early and often, but mostly I think, in relation to past things and past ways that are now irrelevant. Or the word 'history' is applied positively and regretfully to cosy remembrances of a rosy kind of pseudo-past. And there is wide interest in history as entertainment. Often though, it is just a pejorative label for the irrelevant. I remember the first time I heard it used in this way, about 25years ago. I was in the courthouse in Armidale, making a booking with the clerk to use some of the old death registers held there. 'How about

next Thursday?’ I asked. He looked at the diary and replied ‘nope. Next Thursday there’s a Circuit Court sitting. The rooms will be full.’

‘Next Thursday’, he said cheerfully, ‘is history’. And I remember being astonished at this usage. Today it is common, and currently the Macquarie dictionary gives as one of the meanings for history as ‘to be history’ – ‘to be broken beyond repair.’

In this world of the ‘now’, innovation is valued over depth of knowledge. It is more or less *de rigueur* for senior management to strip out old employees, end old practices and destroy corporate knowledge, often with no more assessment of the relative value of the old and the new than would be given to choosing a pair of shoes. Everything is downsized, restructured and out-sourced, and just when you think things are beginning to settle down, then they do it all over again. This applies to state bureaucracies as much as it does to the corporate sector. There are harrowing stories doing the rounds, of CEOs who employ a historian to write the corporate history of a firm or an organisation, for the sole reason that it will tell them who to jettison, who to get rid of because they are of the old guard. If coincidentally these people also know a thing or two about how the place works, that is discounted as irrelevant or even dangerous. Corporate hype, buttressed by slick PR spin -doctoring is often used as a cover for gross corporate ignorance.

Often the primary role of managers is little more than to reach a specified reduction in internal costs or in staffing levels. And needless to say, historical input is never seen as ‘core business’. History? You must be joking.

‘What did you do today?’

‘Well, I thought’.

It’s a hard one to carry off. ‘Thinking’ is not amenable to the kinds of measurements that inform the latest performance targets, and in-depth knowledge is treated with suspicion, threatens the new brooms or is cast as ‘boring’. It is good that in NSW at least, the numbers of school students who are studying history is on the rise. But how does this square with the decimation of history departments where all that slowly developed research is done, in the universities.

At a certain famous Sandstone University the proportion of administrative staff to academics grew from 24% in 1980 to 95% in 1994. (ie from 1 administration position to every 4 academics to almost 1 for 1). Now it would be a foolish person who would argue that universities didn't need some shaking up, or that academics shouldn't be accountable, but there must come a point where over-management can endanger the fundamental core reason for being. This amazing growth in management personelle has been partially achieved through the decimation of teaching positions in the 'un-new' disciplines like history. Historians are constantly being encouraged to argue that they actually something else, teach something else, to use more trendy terminology.

Those figures that I've just quoted come from the book 'Why Universities Matter' edited by Tony Coady.(3) This book canvasses the issues of the trivialisation of academic work and the ways in which management-led notion that education is just another commodity to buy and sell results in a collapse of democracy. I commend the book to you, including the afterword by Morag Fraser, where she discusses why the book was published by Allen & Unwin, and not by the MUP, which has apparently redefined its role to fit the requirements of the 'new university' not to be too critical.

Political leaders often have their own views on the role of history, and like to discuss its importance in 'significant' speeches, but how does *this* square with the failure to employ historians in the public service? There *are* some historians employed in cultural institutions funded by the government, through the Ministry for the Arts in NSW, or at the National War Memorial to use a Federal example. And of course many history graduates work in a variety of jobs with in the public service, but the number of historians who are employed *as historians* within bureaucracies are few and far between. Historians? You'd have to be joking.

I'm one of them, and I want to acknowledge the support of the City of Sydney in seeing the point of employing such a person. North Sydney also employs an historian, Margaret Park. At last count here were 174 local government authorities in NSW. That's two down, 172 to go. In general it has been the local government sector that has employed historians, usually to write commissioned local histories, more rarely to be an integral part of the organisation. Those of us who work as

professional historians dream of the day when the value of historical inputs is recognised to the point where every government department employs one –or two or ten.

In their absence, I often seem to be a port of call for other organisations. The other day I received a phone call from someone in a government department that shall remain nameless. The caller was writing some ‘fact sheets’, she said, for distribution to the foreign media who will be descending on Sydney for the Olympics. She was currently doing a history one. On past industries. She wanted to write something about sheep. Some facts.

‘I know that you write about Sydney’ she said, but was it possible that I knew anything about sheep?

‘Try me,’ I said.

‘There was this man’, she said, ‘who was involved in the early wool industry’. John someone, she thought.

‘Macarthur?’ I suggested.

‘Yes’, she said. That sounded about right. ‘How do you spell that?’

The conversation wandered across a few more ‘facts’ about Macarthur, and then she asked, with an air of incredulity:

‘Why do you think he wanted to grow wool?’

Said as if she couldn’t quite see why he didn’t just cut to the chase and invent lycra, there and then.

I started to launch into a brief exposition on the role of the Yorkshire mills in the development of the early export trade of NSW, but I sensed that I was losing her. In any case, this was veering into dangerous territory of ‘opinion’, not easily captured in shorthand for a ‘fact sheet’.

‘Where do you usually go for information’, I asked her.

‘Oh, the net’, she said, as if there were no other source.

And so today, we invent a past world that is as informative as the last web page.

This exchange reminded me of a tale told by The Lord Mayor's speechwriter. She had been in a hurry to find out who had said 'youth is wasted on the young' and thought she would try the net. It turned up on about a dozen sites, and every-one of them led to the *Smashing Pumpkins*. This group, as I'm sure you will all know, has a song titled 'Through the Eyes of Ruby' that contains the line 'youth is wasted on the young'. This speechwriter is a bit savvy, and she reckoned that this wasn't quite right, so she went to the library and checked it out in the old fashioned way and came up with the more conventional information that it was George Bernard Shaw.

The new electronic tools that we are often told will replace old economy 'books' do not generate any quality controls or measures for ranking knowledge. Even the term 'knowledge' begins to sound quaintly old fashioned. It is 'information' we are told that we need now. And sooner or later someone will seriously stake a claim for the *Smashing Pumpkins* in relation to that observation about the young.

Of course, change and new growth are essential to any kind of living system, but so too is custodianship. Currently change for change sake has become a mindless mantra, chanted with ever increasing velocity. Change is good, and any old change will do. As long as you believe it is a new change.

In my own field of urban studies, listen to some of the wisdom of Bill Hudnut, former Mayor of Indianapolis, in the keynote address at a 'Cities on the Rebound' Conference held recently in Brisbane. The conference was organised by the Property Council of Australia and attended by a lot of people who have a lot of clout.

Hudnut talked about how 'cities could ride the waves of change' generated by the new economy. To weather the storm [of globalisation] Australia's cities must 'disenthrall themselves' to keep pace with changes... Cities that will be good places to live will *not* be cities that say 'come weal or come woe our status is quo'. They will understand that there are really only two alternatives: innovate or vegetate'. And so on.(4)

Now there may not be much of substance in that to get your teeth into, but it must be listened to because it is the language that sets the discourse of the street and of the board room on a trajectory that cannot accommodate the idea of history or the value of history.

Right now, there are good sound reasons to explain all this rebuttal of the 'old'. They are to do with the reality that we are going through a period where capitalism has never been less contested, never been more free to do as it pleases. The so-called 'triumph of capitalism', we are told, allows us all to live an ideology-free lifestyle in a context of increasing wealth. There is very little organised political opposition to the speedy and, to many, terrifying acceleration of the economy into a global formation that challenges national autonomies. And in such a context, it might be better that people do not know too much about the past. Because such knowing could be a dangerous thing.

Just imagine if those convicts were sent to the end of the earth – to Sydney- at the end of the eighteenth century, had studied the parameters of the second agrarian revolution, or understood the reasons for the upheaval in the new industrial towns of England. If they had they would have known how to respond constructively, to analyse just why there were so many overflowing hulks on the Thames, why the courts were overworked and why the whole social experiment of setting up NSW was happening. And they would have acted differently. ....And today, if a person who comes to this place - Government House- knows the stories recorded by the early diarist David Collins, of how this very place was used for ceremonial dances by the local Eora, they would know how better to assess British imperialism.... A person who knows that 8 hours of work used to be the norm will be more likely to ask questions about current work hours, and what it is that is making so many of us time poor, while others can't find work. ....A person who knows that the proportion of people in jails is rising might want to know why.

The thing about history is that it provides *the only* measure of the value of the 'new.' Its not that things 'back then' were better, or worse. The past holds many things that are terrible, and many things have improved. It's just that if you don't know the history then you don't know which is which. And when history is so out of fashion,

when anything older than yesterday is passe, you might want to ask whose interests are being served by wanting things that way?

History is not about the past. It's about understanding causation. That nothing just happens, that everything is socially constructed and nothing is inevitable. Not even in the marketplace. That everything *can* change, and that things do change because men and women act. That you need not just be acted upon. You can act. That's why history is out of fashion in the new economy. Not because it's boring or irrelevant or useless. But because it's a potentially dangerous tool for developing a critical capacity to analyse and therefore to act.

.....The speed of development of the global economy and the instant access to it *by the few* has not been matched by any political sophistication to deal with it. Once there were economies that could be seen and located, and if there was a political will, altered through the medium of legislation. Today, now, governments everywhere are in retreat from the social contract that for much of the twentieth century linked economy to society.

And it's easy to see how the constraints of legislation and public scrutiny that are central to the democratic state can become increasingly irksome in the face of all this real shift in power towards a capital formation that is increasingly more influential and more elusive. The temptation to short cut democratic processes grows. We could all cite many instances where government has acted in ways that support capital and ignore the issues of democracy. It might not be judicious to raise specific local examples here, but the question of the demise of public space is a clear example that could be illustrated with reference to *any* city where development pressures are great. In the case of our city, Sydney, this also includes the waterways. Apologists for the contraction of the public domain redefine the term 'public space' to include privately owned and corporate space which is available to the public, but of course that is not the same thing. There may be caveats that ensure access, for now, but the long term is not secured and the definition of who is 'the public' is frequently narrowed. [*this place, Government House is a wonderful example of a move in the other direction.*] But in general, in the face of rapidly expanding power and money of the global few, it is tempting for governments become impatient with their own limitations, and resist



appearing to be constrained by fussy little citizens who think that they should have a voice.

In the global economy, yes, economic growth happens, but disparities in wealth between nations increases, between rural and urban, between core and periphery. Bizarre discrepancies occur: the efficiencies of e-banking, for example, sit side by side with the reality that people in remote places can only cash cheques through a network of shopkeepers who place - dare I say it? - nineteenth century patterns of obligation on the recipients. Here in Sydney the average income of the inner eastern suburbs and the lower north shore has increased by 38% in the last five years, almost double the rate of the rest of Sydney at 20%. At December 1999, the national unemployment rate was officially about 7%. This concealed a rate of well over 10% for some rural regions, and a rate of below 4% for these same inner Sydney suburbs. (5) They are starting to be referred to in the literature as the 'global suburbs'. Make no mistake, the global economy needs only *some* of us.

There used to be a tradition in Australia of believing we were an egalitarian nation. The experience of our Indigenous people, or the way many of our non- Anglo citizens have experienced life takes the shine off this idea somewhat, but what is disturbing is that in the last few years it has become unfashionable to even refer to the idea. Economic inequality has widened. Democratic practices have narrowed. Equalities we thought we had secured have unravelled.

Tonight we have honoured Bede Nairne. But how do we hold onto the idea, to use the title of one of his books, of 'civilising capitalism' in a world where 'economy' exists increasingly without 'society.'

In so far as the rationale for all this is economic growth and more growth, many people believe that it challenges the very ongoing health and survival of the planet. But if you say so,... if you wonder whether as a society we just might be moving in the direction of fracturing along the fault lines of growing disparity in wealth... if you even wonder about that, or if you wonder about the potential for ecological collapse ... you are politely scoffed at. 'So seventies'.

To observe that an idea is ‘so seventies’ (or depending on your politics, ‘so fifties’) is enough to silence its expression, and there is no need to explain why. That is the past. Any stray thought you may have about some of the current norms of behaviour – ie that which purports to be new – as being akin to what you thought were nineteenth century practices long eradicated, is heresy. Remember -and I repeat it - the struggle to win the eight hour day? Remember the time when the lowliest in the wage chain were protected from downward wages because it was understood that what is now called ‘pattern bargaining’ protected the weak? Or, on the other hand, remember the Rev. Thomas Malthus, who argued back in the 1790s that the poor could not be helped through state intervention because the poor *were* the problem. It wasn’t the harsh realities of the then ‘new’ industrialising world. No. It was the poor themselves. They lacked, to use Malthus’ words, ‘moral restraint’. They deserved to be blamed for it.(6) Does that ring any bells? Does a certain Federal Minister read Malthus at night? Dangerous stuff, history.

Now you would expect someone giving such a lecture as this to assert the value of history. That’s supposed to be the purpose of this lecture. But I’m also here to tell you that out in the world of the public historian where I work, there is a common assumption is that historians, along with bunyips, don’t exist.

‘ So you’re really a librarian,’ they say, or often, with real puzzlement, ‘well what *do* you do?’ The official statisticians who tabulate the nations profile think the same. We might write down ‘historian’ on the census form, but in the published record, the Bureau of Statistics records this in the category ‘other social professionals’. In many other countries you can find out how many people think they are historians, but not here.

Neither is the role of historian much understood by many professional colleagues in related fields. The heritage industry is often cited as a place where historians can be found, but this is only true in part. Documents such as conservation plans of management are theoretically underpinned by a contextual history that informs the central statement of significance. But in practice the so -called ‘contextual history’ is often the least valued part of the work, often done in a hurry, on a shoestring by the

least experienced member of the consulting team undertaking the work. Usually an architectural firm. Often there is just no historian in sight.

Still, historians love all architects who have some heritage sensitivities in comparison with the other kind. Like the respected practitioner who told me recently:

‘ But there are no heritage buildings in Australia worth saving. We should put our heritage dollar to the service of the world and save really good buildings - like the Taj Mahal - and just let the architects here in Australia get on with the business of creating some good new buildings. To the historian, the notion of ‘not having any heritage buildings’ does not even begin to make sense, and I won’t dwell on it, except to say that heritage is about understanding where we have come from, about social and cultural meanings and roots, and not merely about celebrating ‘good architecture’. There is probably little of architectural value, for instance, in the single story red brick box with a pitched roof lined with jade green glazed tiles that is the Yiu Ming Temple in Retreat Street, Alexandria, recently added to the heritage register. But it surely tells us much about our local Chinese origins.

Preserving our built heritage *is* about keeping the best, but it is also about keeping traces of the ordinary and deep roots of our past.

This failure to see any role for history is related to the second commonly held view ‘out there’ which is not so much that history does not exist, but rather that anyone can do it.

I recently had dealings with someone who had to create some words for a plaque for one of the new tower-blocks in the city. He kept coming back to the City Council with a form of words that indicated little real understanding of the site. I suggested that perhaps the developers really should get an historian on board to do a bit of research. They didn’t, and the heritage planner who was overseeing the work said to me in exasperation ‘ what is it with these people? The whole project costs millions, yet they won’t spend a few dollars on getting the historical plaque right.’ My response was to suggest that it had nothing to do with the money, which would indeed have been an insignificant amount. The problem was that there was really no

understanding that their plaque was *not* OK, or that there actually was any skill involved in understanding the history of the site.

The assumption that history is known – that it is acquired through some process of social osmosis - applies particularly at the local level. We live here. We know it. You don't. And often those with the narrowest of imaginations who have led the smallest of lives are the most vociferous in declaring their belief that they know all about it.

Then there is a subset of this, the assumption is that there is nothing *to* know, that our history - compared to the history of 'really interesting countries' - is shallow, somehow flat and boring.

\*\*In contrast, historians themselves have not been bored in the last decades. Within the academy, the changing ways in which the historian has practiced over the last thirty years have been enormous. New kinds of history making have emerged to challenge traditional forms. The post-colonial reassessment of Western imperialism, the role of women's history in exposing how limited the voice of the imagined past had been, the contribution of an ecological understanding to the way we think our history...the list goes on. By the eighties historians had discovered literary and cultural theory and explored textual discursive ways of dealing with the past. All this was a long way from the older narrative and quantitative ways of understanding the world.

And of course there has been great debate about all this. Amongst academic historians, that is. Currently I'm hoping that there is a bit of a thaw in relations and a more generous approach to considering the possibility that some of the older skills of the political and economic historians have worth, just as some of the newer interests of the semioticians and the cultural theorists have deepened our understanding of things.

But all the professional angst over what are very fundamental questions concerning the nature of truth and knowledge are totally irrelevant out in the world I inhabit. What passes for history out there is something else. And the thing that drives it is

the question of audience. Often the hardest lesson for the public historian to learn is how wide is the shift from the interior dialogue of the academy to the focus of the audience of the general public. Always the eye must be on the audience, because no matter how finely honed the argument, no matter how impressive the scholarship, if it is not heard, or cannot be heard because the language is foreign, then the whole point of knowing is lost.

And if I were to be permitted to make one gentle incursion into the debates about how we teach history in the academy, it would be simply to ask that the question is sometimes asked ‘how will this be received and understood by a general audience?’ I know that this is not the primary function of the academy, but I do fear that too often academics scan their classrooms in search of the next crop of academics to be admitted into the inner sanctum, and do not take seriously enough their role as teachers of people whose main arena for using their historical knowledge will not be the academy, but somewhere else quite different.

Places where despite all the hype of the ‘now’ there remains a nagging hunger for ‘a bit of history.’ Running against the grain of the new, the whiz bang glitz, there is an undercurrent of urging: ‘...Tell us the stories. Tell us who we are’.

.....

Some of the stories that I am involved in telling relate to the Pyrmont peninsular – adjacent to and just west of Central Sydney. I want to talk briefly about this place as a micro society that captures more directly than most places the pain and the consequences of the shift from old to new economy. The Pyrmont peninsula, which contains the precincts of Pyrmont and Ultimo, was at the urban heart of old industrial Australia. From the 1960s the great wool-stores, powerful urban symbols of the industry that for more than a century most defined out national economy, began to empty out, and from then until the present, the peninsular has been reinvented. The older industrial infrastructure was dismantled as the Sydney economy loosened its ties to the commodity cycle and forged new links with financial markets, tourism and information industries.

The Ultimo powerhouse that had fuelled the urban tramways system fell idle, waiting its metamorphosis into a technology museum. The Pyrmont powerhouse went into stand-by mode. The locals rejoiced at that, as the offerings of the smoke stack had long been a source of anger on washing days, but when the building eventually came down to make way for a casino, they were not so sure about *that*. Workshops and factories closed. The Darling Harbour goods yards were decommissioned and stripped out to make way for convention centres and conspicuous consumption of restaurants and shops. Eventually the sugar ships that had emptied their loads onto the wharves at the end of the peninsula since 1879 came less frequently.

The CSR was one of the last of the old industries to leave, and as with other sites, it turned its substantial property holdings over to a residential development which is currently being completed. It has been named Jackson's Landing. If you think that this sounds a bit phoney, or a bit American, remember that this is unimportant when weighed against the greater need to obliterate any sense of the old and to downgrade the use of the name of 'Pyrmont'.

With the collapse of the industrial infrastructure of the peninsular came the collapse of its population, and most of the new people moving in have no community or old social connections to the place. They are moving into medium to high density housing in a place with precious little provision of open public space, into a remake of a suburb that is currently being touted as anything from the best in Sydney to the new slums of tomorrow. The remaking of the peninsula has been a brutal and visible example of the transition to the new economy.

I can't remember how Hilary Golder and myself thought that things would unfold when we were commissioned to write a history of the area.<sup>(7)</sup> But we quickly found that there was an urgency about it and a desperation amongst these people that their story be told. It was certainly the closest we had ever come to history as therapy. Many of the residents made little distinction between the past and the present. It never occurred to some of them that we, the historians, would not attend the endless community meetings and briefings on the non stop changes to the area, that we would not help them with their submissions to various authorities about aspects of planning

detail and so on. It was not unknown to be called urgently to a meeting in this or that house on a Sunday afternoon to discuss the latest very urgent development or mourn the loss of the next place to feel the weight of the jack-hammers. And eventually we wrote a very cross little history which was subject to some criticism that it was too emotional, that we were too engaged.

And I think we learned something from that fairly torrid experience about the importance of telling the story, that people without history flounder more than those who have some anchors and that the oft heard claim that people are not interested in history is no more than a comment that derives from a people who do not know who they are or why they might count. Until they hear the story told they are inclined to assume that history is always about someone else and never about them. When they realise it is about them, then they are of course empowered to act, and that, as I've already argued, is why history is never 'core business'.

Part of the telling that troubled us was the part that focused on the war memorial. Pyrmont is not a place of monuments or public art works, - or at least it wasn't until recently - but like practically all suburbs it has its war memorial.

Now no- one who is even vaguely familiar with the overseas visiting habits of the present Prime Minister, or with the recent growth in popularity of symbolic events around issues of war remembrances, could have missed noticing the growth in the public mind of the importance of the symbolism of WW1 in discussions of national identity and nation making.

All this performs a useful role for citizenship in creating a story of nationbuilding that is uncontextualised. It's surrounded by a rhetoric of sacrifice, but devoid of any historical explanation of that war. Such explanation might result in more people thinking that the 60,000 Australian deaths were as unnecessary as they were sad. That this might just have been a better place if they had been allowed to live.

But in the standard little local history it is not uncommon to simply list the heroes and pay homage to the dead, perhaps to dwell briefly on the horrors of the trenches and the valour of the Anzacs, and then to move on. We could have written something

like that, it would have saved us a lot of trouble, and no-one would have protested, or even noticed, but we knew this was not good enough for Pymont. There were just too many other issues and too much ambivalence in the things that had shaped the lives of the people who lived there in the war years and the years that immediately followed.

The post-war period was one that was touted as a 'new social order' one where the old so-called 'slum housing' of the inner city area was passe, and so were the people who lived there. Homes fit for heroes were very definitely located in the in the suburbs, or even further afield.

The inner city was not only very definitely the wrong place to live in the 1920s, but many of the people who lived there had taken the 'wrong line' on many of the political issues that had strained the fabric of the nation during the war period. After all, this was the ward of the city that voted Bill Lambert onto the City Council from 1918 until 1924. Lambert was Secretary of the AWU, State President of the Labor Party 1917-1921. In 1921 he was Lord Mayor and from 1921 until 1925 was MLA for West Sydney, the state electorate that took in Pymont and Ultimo. Specifically, Lambert was a pacifist and an anti-imperialist. The Town Hall had been conspicuous amongst city buildings for failing to be illuminated for the welcome home parades at the end of the war, and as Lord Mayor in 1921, Lambert had refused to fly the union jack on the Town Hall on Anzac Day. (8) And at the unveiling of the war memorial in Pymont, the school children sang Advance Australia Fair as well as God Save the Queen. There are no prizes for guessing which schools sang which song.

But we were supposed to be writing a little local history, and just how these broader political issues had worked themselves out in Pymont was perhaps too ambitious for what was required. But there didn't seem to be any way that we could ignore the industrial issues that had be-devilled the war years, because there just was nowhere more industrial than industrial Pymont. Rising prices, rising unemployment and fears that this unemployment was being deliberately created to force enlistments all contributed to strained relations which culminated in the Great Strike of 1917. Sydney's workplaces were in turmoil for ten weeks. Eventually the strike spread to other states, but it was most concentrated in Sydney. The 1917 strike is an important



story in Australia's history, but it was played out with more intensity in a place like Pyrmont than almost anywhere else.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of August workers at the Darling Harbour goods yards started to go out. The seamen followed and then the wharf labourers, so that by the 15<sup>th</sup> the wharves were idle. The introduction of volunteer labour to unload the sugar ships led to the CSR carters going out, and the endless clip clopping of their Clydesdales along Harris Street died away. This strike is written large in the memories and the records of the place. 'Dad was out in the 1917 strike' an old resident told me. 'Everyone was'.... And just about everyone *was*, including all the block boys who worked for the City Council - the sparrow starvers they were called, because their job was to sweep up the horse shit from the streets, methodically, block by block. The trigger for this show of solidarity by the city's kids with their fathers is unclear, but the Town Clerk reacted swiftly to their striking by sacking the lot of them. And this would have deprived many inner city households of the only small amount a steady money coming in.

The short-term results of the strike were deregistration, victimisation and sackings. It took years for some men to find work again. Up into the early 1920s railway workers were denied re-employment for trivial reasons that included 'picketed', 'made militant remarks' and 'addressed public meetings'. The staff cards of the CSR, which still exist, have notations against the names as late as the 1930s, like 'off in 1917 strike, or 'served in AIF'.

Meanwhile Hilary had spent some time extracting newspaper reports from the Coronor's Court, and came back with a sobering pile of papers about industrial accidents across the peninsula, as well as the story of the shooting of Merv Flanagan. Flanagan was on strike from the CSR, and had got himself into an altercation on Pyrmont Bridge Road with some blacklegs who had just delivered a cart-load of jam to Birt's wharf. The jam was 'for the troops at the front' claimed the SMH under a headline that screamed '*Mob Assaults Loyalists*'. There was no 'mob,' and both sides were fairly evenly balanced, except that one of the loyalists, Reg Wearne, had a revolver. Wearne also had a brother who was a member of parliament, which helped. He fired his revolver twice, wounding one man in the leg, and hitting Flanagan in the

chest. Flanagan died on the way to hospital. At the coroner's inquest, Wearne was found to have acted in self-defence and the case was dismissed in the Newtown Court. At the end of 1917 a trade union film was made called "The Great Strike". But screening was banned under the War Precautions Act, and when the ban was lifted it was with two conditions. That the title be altered to 'The Recent Industrial Happenings in New South Wales' and that the killing of Flanagan be deleted from the footage.

So... how to write about the war years in Pyrmont? We sifted through the possible story lines for a long time and in the end the story went something like this:

On April 8, 1922 a simple war memorial was unveiled by the governor in Pyrmont Square. An angel holds a shield inscribed with the words 'their name liveth forever', and on the plinth below are the names of the 750 local men and lads who had enlisted. 150 of them died. In statistical terms, Pyrmont had nothing to fear. I've done the sums and it matches the national average. Pyrmont had done its part. On that day in 1922 the speeches were about patriotism and bravery, but for all that, these men were not the only ones in Pyrmont who did it tough. Those who stayed behind did not qualify for the white feather, and not all of those who attended the ceremony on crutches or with other signs of injury would have been war victims. But their sacrifice was not so readily acknowledged.

We went on to wonder whether anyone at the memorial would have allowed themselves to reflect on the lives of some of these other neighbours.

Men like Andrew Maddison, who had died in 1914 when a load of timber had fallen on him at Goodlett and Smiths timber yard. And William Knuck, crushed between two railway trucks. Sam Willcocks was killed at the Vacuum Oil Works, and Arthur Hemmings had died when he fell from a platform at the Farmers and Dairyman's Milk Company. Jim Huggins died after a fall at Wood Coffil's livery department in Harris Street, and then there was that man with the odd name, Fondre, who had crashed to his death from the scaffolding attached to the smoke stack at the CSR. And that was just in the factories and workshops. It was hard to recall the names of those who were injured or killed working the wharves. Often the men came from

elsewhere, and the impact on the local community was not so intense. But someone might have remembered Dave Harrington, who was crushed under a fall of gypsum on the *Junee* when it tied up at Pyrmont in 1915. It was round about then that Charlie Bland was killed when he fell from a ladder at the Tech College. Bill Russell, who worked as a plumber for the City Council had fallen and died in Bunn Street, and Harry Clement at one of the woolstores in Wattle Street.

1916 seemed to be a year for deaths at the Darling Harbour goods yards. Robert Gibbs was run over, and so was Percy Wheway. Lionel Baily got crushed between a truck and the bogey of a refrigerating car. As the death tolls mounted at the front, news of more mundane killings at home were often pushed out of the newspapers, but the toll went on.

.....Run over by a hopper on Darling Island...died in an electric explosion at the Mount Street substation...smothered by a fall of a wheat stack...killed by a fall into the hold of the *Gallava*, at No. 9 Wharf...crushed to death by the plate of a crane conveyor at the CSR.

The list goes on and on. There were frequent domestic accidents involving women and mayhem on the streets of the peninsular in the period of technological changeover where horse carts and timber jinkers jostled with trucks and trams. Lots of children got killed on those streets. That was one of the startling things to us about the oral reminiscences of people who only go back as far as living memory. The number of deaths of children.

But it is hard to make the roll of honour of all these people, because apart from family memories their names live only in official records and sketchy press reports.

None of this was intended to denigrate the sacrifice made for the war. But while it is true that there will never be enough money to do all the historical research that historians would want to see done, it is also true that there will be relatively more money for things that governments want to fund, and that includes war history. The current upsurge of interest in war memories, the exponential growth in ritual pilgrimages to Gallipoli and the Western Front is a topic beyond the reach of this

lecture. Partly of course it is because it *is* important. But at least some of the answer lies in the reality that this particular war story has been told and told until it is familiar.

There are a thousand other stories that have not been told. Without them we mistakenly imagine the past is boring, or flat or disappeared into the mists of time. Ken Inglis, historian of the war memorial, observed at the Sydney Writers Festival a few weeks ago that the memory of war fills a vacuum in the souls of our young people. A nation, or a community that rears a people with empty souls is indeed a poor nation. And a powerless one, where the current issues and problems can only be tackled from a position of ignorance. The emptiness must be filled with many stories, and not just the ones it suits the powerful to tell.

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One of the joys of writing local history at the coal face is that people stop you in the street or ring in to tell you they liked it. Or that they didn't....That you got this bit wrong and so on.

Just after the little Pyrmont book was published one of the residents whom we knew only slightly came up and thanked us - not for the book, mind you - just for pages 94 to 99 specifically. The pages that I've just been talking about.

'I cried when I read it', she said. But mostly she said ' I didn't know' over and over. 'I just didn't know'. What didn't she know? What did she think she had learned?

Was it the recognition of a common suffering? Did she connect to that? Was it acceptance of the paucity of the current tale that honours the soldier but ignores the rest? Or that people fight all sorts of wars? Was it the idea that these people, people like those who exist within her own world, counted? That ordinary people contribute? Or that according to the employers they didn't count for much at all? That they were relevant to the way Sydney developed? That history is not just something wafting off into 'the mists of time', good for a bit of light entertainment but nothing else? I don't know what it was she thought she didn't know. But I do know that for many people discovering some connections with their own history can be empowering.

I have come to value the way people say ‘I’ve learned something I didn’t know’.

And especially ‘I’ve learned something new’. New. They get it. It’s about now. It’s gaining the insights to put yourself in the picture. About finding a context in which to act. Now.

Notes:

- (1) Stuart Macintyre, ‘History ain’t history’, *Australian Quarterly*, Nov-Dec, 1999, p.8
- (2) In the weeks leading up to Corroboree 2000 held at the Sydney Opera House on 27<sup>th</sup> May, there was a lot of public discussion about the stolen generation issue. Although the practice of separating Aboriginal children from their families was carried out by state government agencies, the refusal of Prime Minister Howard to say the word ‘sorry’ focused the nation’s attention on the Federal Government’s attitude towards indigenous issues. John Herron, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs made a public statement suggesting that only 10% of indigenous children had been so removed.
- (3) Tony Coady, ed. *Why Universities Matter: a conversation about values, means and directions*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1999
- (4) Chris Newland in *Property Australia*, April, 2000, pp.26-7
- (5) wealth data compiled from Australian Taxation Office statistics by Phillip Raskall for the City of Sydney.
- (6) Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of population, as it affects the future improvement of society*. London, printed for J Johnson, 1798. The essay had considerable currency in the early decades of the nineteenth century.
- (7) Details for the following section from Shirley Fitzgerald and Hilary Golder, *Pyrmont and Ultimo: under siege*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1994.
- (8) Shirley Fitzgerald, *Sydney 1842-1992*, Hale & Iremonger, 1992, pp 104-5,167,195.

\*\* The following four paragraphs were not delivered on the night of the lecture because of time constraints.

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