

## THE NEXT ASSIGNMENTS

When Pope Alexander VI in 1494 divided the world between Portuguese and Spanish spheres of influence he can never have imagined that he was creating Western Australia. By placing the dividing line of longitude at a point which would give Brazil to Portugal he inadvertently ensured that the western third of the then unknown Australian continent would lie in the Portuguese zone while the rest went to Spain. Three centuries later when the British asserted sovereignty over Australia they at first laid claim only to the former Spanish sphere of influence, at first east of longitude 135 and subsequently as far as the 'Pope's line' at longitude 129 degrees. It has been suggested that the failure to annex Western Australia was due to respect for the British East India Company, who could be seen as inheriting the shadowy Portuguese entitlement in the Indian Ocean region. When in 1826 Governor Darling eventually sent a garrison to show the flag at King Georges Sound, now the site of Albany, the East India Company's authority had waned and it seemed necessary to discourage foreign powers from laying claim to Western Australia. Soon afterwards Captain James Stirling established the Swan River Colony and Western Australia was defined as all that part of the continent lying west of longitude 129 east. For much of its length this boundary line has some justification, as the Nullarbor Plain and the Great Sandy Desert are geographic features which might well foster a sense of separateness; however there is little logic in dividing the Kimberley district from the western part of the Northern Territory. Nevertheless Western Australia has been defined by 'the Pope's line' for close on two centuries and has been the subject matter of historians for more than one century. Nearly all of them have remarked that one of the most obvious defining features of Western Australia has been a sense of isolation, not only from the rest of Australia but from the rest of the world.

A heightened historical consciousness may be one of the consequences of this sense of isolation. Once in every generation since the coming of self-government in 1890 a single author has attempted to summarise and interpret the history of Western Australia since British occupation and settlement in 1829. In 1897 Warren Bert Kimberly, an early example of then free-lance professional in search of a commission, produced an account of 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Australia which, despite his comparatively short sojourn in the

colony, contained many acute insights on which later historians have built. One who built on Kimberly was Dr James Sykes Battye, who compiled a carefully uncontroversial account which also stopped short at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Strongest and still useful on the history of exploration and constitutional change, Battye published in 1924 at a time when several of the participants in contentious aspects of Western Australia's past, including a number of ex-convicts, were still very much alive, and his reticence is understandable in a community which valued consensus. His work remained the standard reference until the arrival of the energising influence of the young Frank Crowley at the University of Western Australia during the 1950s. Crowley summed up the results of a decade's archival research and graduate supervision in *Australia's Western Third*, published in 1960. Believing that 'the prize of history is the understanding of modern times', Crowley devoted more than half his book to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a much greater emphasis on social and economic history than his predecessors did.

To this day his solidly researched narrative retains value, but since its publication nearly half a century has elapsed and Western Australian historical writing had advanced enormously. Vigorous research in the state's four public universities has been buttressed by the increasing professionalism of free-lance historians and bodies such as the Royal Historical Society of Western Australia. All this activity has been unable to do justice to the wealth of articles and primary sources preserved and classified at the Battye Library and the State Record Office. In 1981 Tom Stannage edited a multi-author anthology incorporating many of the findings of recent research, but much more has been produced since then. I am myself in the last stages of producing a short history for the convenience of historians and non-historians alike, but it would be vainglorious for any individual historian to imagine that he or she could produce a short history, which adequately summarised all the new approaches and insights which have bubbled up among lively-minded historians of Western Australia during the last two decades. The experience has nevertheless left me with some ideas about future directions for our research, and in this short paper I mean to develop them.

Consider our assets first. We in Western Australia possess one of the finest foundations for research on historical demography of any community in the world, and

we owe that asset to the initiative of Rica Erickson. In its present form the Biographical Dictionary of Western Australians covers five volumes listing our settlers of European origin, four covering the period from 1829 and 1888 and one, necessarily less complete and more superficial, covering 1889 to 1914. Four volumes list Aboriginal inhabitants, covering the South-West, Albany and New Norcia districts and those incarcerated on Rottnest between 1838 and 1931. One volume covers the Chinese settlers of Western Australia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. No other Australian State, and very few if any communities in the English-speaking world can boast such a collection. South Australia comes nearest with a four-volume compendium on those who lived in the colony between 1836 and 1888 but there has not as yet been the same attention given to non-Europeans. Western Australia in this instance has benefited from its isolation, since the slow growth of the first sixty years of European settlement limited the population to manageable proportions. Control by the British authorities, especially after the introduction of convicts in 1850, left a massive residue of official records which survives, partly through good fortune and partly through the enterprising archival practice which will always be associated with the name of Mollie Lukis.

Though we should be proud of this achievement much still remains to be done. To supplement the material already in the Biographical Dictionary we have relied mainly in recent years on the devoted work of members of the Western Australian Genealogical Society. In addition individual researchers have thrown up valuable data on particular cross-sections of our population. I think, for instance, of Andrew Gill's researches on the Parkhurst juvenile prisoners, or Ian Crawford's patient detective work identifying Nyoongars in the 19<sup>th</sup> century South-West. Many sources however remain to be tapped even for the period up to 1888. Now that most of the colonial newspapers of that period are available on improved microfilm we can expect an increase in their use for research. Anyone who peruses them for any length of time will be aware that there is a lot of material about individuals which has not as yet found its way to the Biographical Dictionary. Tradesmen advertise their wares, ex-convicts lapse into petty crime and are brought before the courts, neighbours give testimony at inquests, farmers win prizes at the local show. It would be particularly rewarding to search for such material in the rural

press which came into being after 1877, in such periodicals as the *Eastern Districts Chronicle* and the *Victorian Express*.

There are even individuals who have not found their way into the Biographical Dictionary's pages. To take one example, I was researching for an article for the Australian Dictionary of Biography on Sir Ross McDonald, who was born at Albany in January 1888, the son of Angus McDonald, a bank manager, and his wife Emily. The bank managers were important figures in country towns, but there is nothing about Angus in the Biographical Dictionary. This point is not made at all critically - after all, perfection belongs to God alone - but it does suggest the need to continue to add to the contents of the Biographical Dictionary. Again there are cases where the same individual is reported under two or three different entries, material about him or her having been gathered from several different sources, and it would be helpful if such entries were consolidated.

We have been doing our best to celebrate the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the colonisation of Western Australia and we have been keen to do honour to the work of Rica Erickson, but I would suggest that both good causes would benefit if the History Council found itself able to sponsor a seminar on the future directions of the Biographical Dictionary of Western Australians. This is not a project which needs to be crammed into the dwindling remnant of the 2004 celebrations, but it would be timely to pool our ideas about what can realistically be attempted. Progress could be attempted using both new technology and old. Let us start with the old. Fifty years ago, in an important article entitled 'Scissors and paste in Australian history', Geoffrey Blainey argued that grass-roots research on local and regional history could be advanced by recruiting the help of researchers who were not highly trained historians but who could assist with the patient accumulation of data. If a housewife could give two or three hours a week to card-indexing, he wrote, the results in time would result in a most useful research tool. Both the reference to housewives as an under-utilised source of labour and the use of card indexes are more redolent of 1954 than 2004, but his point remains sound. In many suburbs and country centres volunteers could be encouraged to spend two or three hours a week going through the local newspapers or council records and recording data about individuals which could be sent to some centralised location. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-

day Saints are to be found working through such sources in Australia and many other countries in order to build up the genealogical holdings at Salt Lake City. Many of us who are not members of the faith have found these records a useful source to consult. Why should we not encourage the same enthusiasm among Western Australians for our own local product?

The compilation of a central repository of course has been immensely facilitated by recent developments in computer technology. In deciding on the sort of data base which we wish to create for our Biographical Dictionary we should not be backward in consulting experience elsewhere. The New Zealand Dictionary of Biography has for some years been a model of the advanced use of computer technology, and its lessons are now being learned by the Australian Dictionary of Biography. Other projects also invite attention. In Melbourne Janet McCalman and her team have been processing hospital records from the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and this has enabled them to build up a profile of public health at that time with some interesting implications. It has been found possible to pin-point the role of poor housing as an influence on public health by checking out the places of residence of hospital patients. More surprisingly, McCalman and her colleagues appear to have refuted the old truism that colonial-born children were healthier than those of migrant stock. The figures from Melbourne in the 1860s and 1870s seem to suggest otherwise. Two explanations have been suggested. One is that the migrants of the goldrush era in Victoria were individuals and families with a modest amount of capital and enterprise, drawn from the respectable artisan and lower middle-class, and hence already of healthy genetic stock. The other is that many of the families of colonial origin were in fact the children of Van Diemen's Land convicts who crossed the Bass Strait in considerable numbers after transportation ceased in the 1840s, and that both their hereditary influences and upbringing were against them. Whatever the outcome of the debate, the intelligent use of computer analysis of raw demographic material has enabled us to raise questions and seek answers not previously accessible in historical research. The material available to us in Western Australia should enable us to make useful comparisons with findings such as McCalman's.

We have our own model of the constructive use of demographic data in Margaret Grellier's seminal chapter on 'The family' in Stannage's *New History of Western Australia*

which drew on the York census of 1859 to advance some much better articulated findings on family size and reproductive patterns than anything previously. Although the York census is an apparently unique example of census data which somehow survived the old bad custom of destroying all such material, the family biographies accumulated in the Biographical Dictionary already offer us the possibility of confirming and amplifying Grellier's findings. We could also begin to look at such issues as the geographical and social mobility of colonial families, as well as testing the usefulness of class and status in social analysis. When in time it becomes possible to attempt further exploration of the period after 1888 the sources will be rich. We shall have the wealth of goldfields and country newspapers to draw on. We shall have the municipal rate books of which Meredith Thomas made such good use in her pioneering study of East Perth around 1900. We shall have the microfiche of all those buried or cremated at Karrakatta and other cemeteries, from which we may trace death notices in the newspapers with details of families and membership of clubs and benefit societies.

Although the size of the enterprise may daunt us from attempting the same kind of in-depth survey after 1914 there are many smaller areas of inquiry which might benefit from use of the statistical approach. One already under way concerns the effectiveness of Perth Modern School as a ladder of opportunity. Was it, as Jenny Gregory suspects, of advantage mainly to middle-class children from suburbs such as Nedlands and Cottesloe, or was it a goal for those who attended Highgate, North Perth, and Maylands primary schools? In either case, were girls discouraged from making the attempt? Did suburbs with a strong specialised working-class culture such as Midland Junction and Fremantle contribute less than the average recruitment? David Black is now starting to answer these vexed questions, but the scholarship results are proving surprisingly hard to get hold of, and suggest the need for a well planned data base. Another issue arises from our political history. In 1933 68 per cent of Western Australian voters decided in favour of secession from the Australian Commonwealth; in 1944 Western Australia was one of the only two States to vote in favour of the fourteen-point referendum which would have increased the postwar powers of the federal government. This inconsistency may be explained by the impact of the Second World War (although mistrust of the Eastern States surely lingered in the widely held credence given to the Brisbane Line), but it would be worth attempting

a constituency by constituency analysis of voting patterns to see if any illumination would emerge.

The history of the wheatbelt suggests further research. In 1930 the State Government, confronted with the great depression, introduced the Farmers Debts Adjustment Act,. This provided a mechanism under which farmers at risk of foreclosure from their creditors could continue operations on a year-to-year basis under their direction and the supervision of an inspector of the Agricultural Bank. In its first two years of operation 725 farmers went under the Act, but we do not know how many of them were enabled to survive in this way nor how many persisted to share in the recovery of prosperity after the Second World War. Again, in 1950 Dr Joseph Gentilli published a table correlating rainfall and wheat production in each of the region's local government authorities. His findings tended to suggest that despite the application of superphosphate and improved technology wheat yields in most districts were at best stationary. It would be useful to test his findings against the figures of the subsequent half-century.

Western Australia's isolation may prove helpful in enabling us to analyse its statistics, but isolation has done much more to shape Western Australian attitudes. I have neither time nor imagination to sketch all the questions about Western Australia which might be geographically determined, but here are a few:

- (1) Fear of foreign invasion has been a leit-motif in the consciousness of Western Australians ever since Captain Stirling decided that Buckland Hill was too exposed to hostile bombardment to provide a suitable site for a capital city, and chose instead the present site of Perth, sheltered by Mount Eliza and the approach through the Narrows. In 1868 leading citizens of Fremantle were trembling at the thought that American warships or privateers might bombard the port in order to conduct a rescue operation on the Fenian prisoners transported from Ireland. In 1876 the Americans constituted the threat again, when their consul in Melbourne sent a boarding party to raise the Stars and Stripes on the Lacedpede Islands, only to be displaced by police sent by the Roebourne magistrate. In 1880 a Geraldton newspaper reported that the marquis de Rays, a grandiose French aristocrat, intended to take advantage of the remoteness of Western Australia's north by establishing a colony there to be called Port Breton. Eventually the marquis took

his luckless colonists to New Britain, off the coast of New Guinea, where the enterprise soon failed, but Western Australians remained fearful. In the summer of 1881-82 reports of an unidentified whaling boat were enough for Governor Robinson to call out the volunteer militia.

Even when federation brought Western Australia within the defence of a united Australia nervousness of the outsider remained a recurrent theme. It is hard to think it entirely coincidence that the years following federation saw State governments creating a number of icons symbolising Western Australia's distinct political identity. A badly needed Supreme Court building was completed in 1903. Next year a new Parliament House was opened on the hill in West Perth overlooking the central business district. On a different level of self-assertion the Western Australian government embarked on the erection of a fence stretching over 1 800 kilometres from Condon, near Onslow, to the south coast near Esperance for the purpose of keeping out the hordes of introduced rabbits infesting the Eastern States. Of course no fence is proof against fools who leave gates open, and within a few years rabbits cavorted throughout the agricultural south-west, leaving the fence as a symbolic barrier to whatever plagues and nuisances might emanate from eastern Australia. The theme continues throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the secession movement and the Brisbane Line only two examples of a prevailing mistrust of the outsider. Perhaps in our own time bikie gangs and unauthorised 'boat people' personify the unwelcome intruder. Just as 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Australians chafed against the dominance of London, so their descendants complain about the inroads of Canberra, and the West's dependence on the protection of others breeds its own ambivalence.

2: A more constructive response to isolation lies in a readiness to attempt innovation. This was early apparent in Western Australia's settled history. No sooner had the colonial surgeon, Dr John Ferguson, read about the successful application of chloroform as an anaesthetic for operations than he made his own experiment in its use at the colonial hospital. Alfred Carson and the Yankee immigrant, Solomon Cook, were notable for their work with steam-engines; in 1852 Cook's steam-mill at York was reported as grinding enough corn to supply most of the district's needs. Shortly afterwards Cook installed engines in several passenger and cargo boats plying on the

Swan River, and in 1862 produced a threshing machine adapting Ridley's South Australian prototype for local conditions. His namesake George Cook, a free emigrant who arrived in 1854 and was appointed government coachmaker, was also noted for his steam engines and working models. His inventions included an alarm clock which activated a tea-making device, but there was no scope for its commercial development. James Coates Fleming, a young merchant transported for forgery in 1864, possessed the skills essential for creating Western Australia's first telegraph line in 1869. In the undercapitalised and underpopulated colony of the 1860s none reaped an adequate reward for his ingenuity.,

But the tradition continued. David Hutchison has pointed out that many of Western Australia's country blacksmiths and wheelwrights around 1900 showed great skill in adapting tools, machinery, and vehicles for local conditions. It was in the unlikely environment of suburban Perth that Alfred Upton Alcock invented the first hovercraft in 1912, consisting of a wooden platform with an electric motor mounted on it which drove both a compressor and a propeller. A patent was taken out in 1914 but lapsed, again because of lack of financial support. Around the same time the farmer Andrew Barr was making a creditable attempt at constructing a flying machine. It may be that after the First World War and the lowering of fuel prices to encourage the use of mechanised farm machinery that local initiative diminished, but the emergence in 1972 of Ralph Sarich with his plans for an orbital engine would suggest that it is far from extinct.

3: More tentatively I would suggest that isolation, or geographic determinism perhaps, has given rise to a peculiarly Western Australian contribution to the nation's intellectual history, and that is the stream of anti-protectionist economic thought known as 'dry'. Most commentators on the federation movement in Western Australia have dismissed the opponents of the scheme as rural reactionaries for whom even Sir John Forrest was too radical. Nevertheless it was reasonable to fear that Western Australia's infant secondary industries would be blighted by exposure to competition from Victoria's protected manufactures. In the *Morning Herald* writers such as Archibald Sanderson and Hal Colebatch senior argued the case cogently but ineffectually. Colebatch, perhaps the nearest thing to an intellectual in Western Australian politics at that time, carried his unfashionable doctrines into the Commonwealth Senate during the depression years from

1929 to 1933, and he would have gained support from the arguments in Edward Shann's *Economic History of Australia* published in 1930. He can be seen as a forerunner of John Stone, perhaps the driest voice ever heard among the ranks of Australia's senior Treasury officials, and John Hyde and Peter Shack, the advocates of 'dry' economic policies during Malcolm Fraser's era, at a time when such thinking had not yet become an overriding orthodoxy. Further exploration seems warranted.

4: Possibly another consequence of isolation lies in the peculiar virulence, in some instances amounting to contempt and hatred, which practical entrepreneurs show towards unwelcome scientific research. Sir James Mitchell was a comparatively benign example of the type, but in his tunnel-visioned enthusiasm to provide Western Australia with staple primary industries he swept aside legitimate criticism. When agricultural scientists cautioned against indiscriminate expansion into marginal rainfall country, Mitchell simply commented: 'I am afraid that if scientists had been around at the time of Adam and Eve nothing would have been achieved'. He brushed off the comment of a party colleague that he wanted to get rid of all the karri trees and replace them with grass and turnips. Western Australia's modern salination problems are largely the result of Mitchell's indiscriminate enthusiasms. During the 1930s it might have seemed that agricultural scientists such as Eric Underwood and George Burvill were winning the fight for a better understanding of the Western Australian environment, but doubts remain. The utterances of such public figures as Lang Hancock and Len Buckeridge suggest that zeal for Western Australia's economic development outruns even the most moderate calls for environmental caution.

None of the foregoing, of course, deals with what many would regard as the foremost issue in contemporary Western Australian historiography: the part played by Aboriginal Western Australians. Historians in this State cannot be accused of ignoring the topic. As early as 1942 Paul Hasluck with *Black Australians* was the first scholarly voice to break the great Australian silence. In the subsequent sixty years he has been followed by Peter Biskup, Neville Green, Mary Anne Jebb, Howard Pedersen, Christine Choo and many more. For more than twenty years Aboriginal oral histories, beginning with the narratives of Paddy Roe and of Bruce Shaw's informants in the East Kimberley district, have added valuable perspectives. During the past decade the reconstruction of

the past has been a main item on the agenda of native title tribunals. This has resulted in the preservation of much useful material, but perhaps involves the risk that the past will be interpreted through the adversary processes of litigation. An emphasis on conflict and dispossession stimulates in turn the reaction of Keith Windschuttle and his sympathisers who would prefer to believe that frontier contact was almost invariably mediated through the ethics of Christian gentlemen.

At intervals during the past three years, following up a suggestion by the premier, Geoff Gallop, I have been looking at the prospects for an Aboriginal history of Western Australia told from an Aboriginal perspective by Aboriginal writers. The word 'Aboriginal' in itself begs some questions. First there is the question of whether we should refer to Western Australians whose ancestors were here before 1829 as 'indigenous' Western Australians, though that leaves us without a convenient description for more recently indigenous Western Australians. Secondly, a strong sense of association with place suggests that we should speak of actors in Western Australian history through their traditional regional allegiances as Bardi or Bunuba or Yamadji. This has practical implications, as in designing an Aboriginal history of Western Australia due importance has to be given to all regions, and it is difficult to secure agreement among Aboriginal scholars as to how the balance should be struck. Thought also has to be given to reconciling differing gender perspectives and ensuring equity of privilege between viewpoints. Thirdly we have to contend with the increasing demand that Aboriginal scholarship should not necessarily be bound by the dominant conventions of mainstream historical writing. The demand for an indigenous epistemology is not unique to Australia, and indeed has precedents in Canada and Aotearoa/New Zealand. We haven't adequately grappled with its implications. To what extent should Aboriginal oral history be accorded a greater authenticity than the evidence from archival sources? Should universities exempt Aboriginal students, including especially postgraduates, from the requirement that their research should be the unaided work of a single individual, and how should recognition be given to the productions of family or group collaboration?

How do we encourage research into the questions which have not yet been tackled? There are moments when I wonder if we have not been spooked by Windschuttle into concentrating too much on body-counts for real or alleged massacres, without sufficiently

looking at other factors which have contributed to the near-destruction and transformation of Aboriginal society. In all the histories which have been written about the Kalgoorlie goldfields nobody, with the partial exception of Lyall Hunt's studies of the Yilgarn, has attempted to evaluate the impact on the Wongi when within a period of months in the 1890s their lands were overrun by thousands of prospectors. How was it that the Aborigines of the Kimberley and Pilbara districts never resorted to the use of guns in their resistance to settler encroachment? We know that within a few years of pastoral occupation in the Kimberleys Aboriginal groups were using glass for spear-heads and building stockyards to impound livestock; how was it, especially during the Bunuba resistance of 1894-97 that, unlike the Maoris, the indigenous resistance never used firearms? We know that settlers sometimes feared that they would. In 1905 the police in the Pilbara reported that Aborigines in the vicinity of Woodstock station possessed guns and rifles and planned to attack all the whites simultaneously. But nothing of the sort happened.

More benignly, we might look more closely at the process by which settlers came to use Aboriginal words and English words were naturalised into Aboriginal speech patterns. Our economic historians have still to evaluate the contribution made by Aboriginal labour to primary production in Western Australia: of crucial importance in the northern districts between 1900 and the 1960s, and perhaps more than marginal in the South-West. In short, I suggest that here is another area in which the History Council might wish to sponsor a State-wide stocktaking so that we can prioritise the tasks deserving attention.

Forty years ago, on departing from Western Australia, Frank Crowley compiled a list of twenty-six topics from (a) to (z) calling for the attention of the State's historians. He has lived to see many of the tasks accomplished. I hope similarly to see action on some of the issues which I have raised today, and I can think of no better agency than the History Council of Western Australia to encourage the good work.

