

Heritage—In Whose Hands? A Regional University's Link to its Community's Traditional Culture

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ABSTRACT: As a regional university, the multi-campused Southern Cross University¹ has as a key part of its *raison d'être* the serving of its region. For a newer university (established 1 January 1994) this has meant a focus upon new opportunities—on shared work towards offering all better 'futures'. It has also meant a selective, even cautious, re-focusing upon certain elements of the region's past. Several threads can be discerned, and following these will help to delineate issues of the nature of these people's heritage and traditional culture, and so of ownership and of their obtaining and offering generous community service.

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Introduction

Recent moves to reconsider the role and function of regional universities in Australia² have tended to emphasise economic development, or better provision of health, education and social services—aspects which are greatly valued by the community and, in their turn. For any forthcoming expressions of support are valued by the university and their political paymasters.

However these recent moves also provide an opportunity to consider those elements which are less tangible—for example, to bring attention to a regional university's link to its community's traditional culture—that set of values, entwined with heritage, that is more often sensed than expressed and certainly, rather than proclaimed, more shyly-held, but nonetheless giving a sense of identity and purpose. Modern consideration of the space for such knowledges can very well/ best come from the (lesser-known) work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, and with it some inkling of the potential power inherent in this long-held heritage.

¹ Located in the North East corner of NSW, with campuses in Coffs Harbour, Lismore, Tweed Heads and Coolangatta.

² For example, see the moves towards a Commonwealth university, comprised of several current regional universities, as discussed Ian Goulter, 'We Need to Think Outside City Squares', *The Australian*, 21 July 2009. [Accessed 22 July 2009, <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25849137-25192,00.html>].

As evidenced in so many media representations, regional knowledge is usually held to be subordinate to national culture—the latter being seen as an abstract which is a somewhat alien amalgam of metropolitan needs for cautious inclusivity, with a romanticised ‘bush’ tradition, and Indigenous issues/examples (usually) from far distant groups. Thereby sympathies/prejudices can be aired without the implications of real and ongoing (local) interactions. Even such a description of urban/metropolitan Australia is rare, for the variety of regional voices is seldom heard or presented without being marshalled into acceptable forms—such as complaints about the weather, lack of infrastructure, or expressions of shallow (non-threatening) enthusiasm. All this ‘attention’ thereby reinforces the dominant comfortable urban/ national worldview. From the regional community’s perspective, however, it is preferable to consider locally-empowering issues.

Foucault

Some support for this can come from Michel Foucault, who is well known for his linking of *knowledge*, *power* and *space*. In a series of lectures, only recently translated into English,³ Foucault stressed the situation of *history* for the *local*. In this formulation, the local is seen as having a longer-term knowledge which is subjugated by the centre—however it is a knowledge which always has the capacity to use resistance against the totalising view of the centre. His exploration probed the situation of regional European communities, where their history often included war against neighbouring or now dominant groups. Just as nation-forming, for example, is never total, so he saw the earlier seemingly-concluded war as continuing into and informing attitudes and relations for the regional communities in the ‘other’ and elsewhere too-readily/ comfortably celebrated period of peace.⁴

His term *bellicose relations*⁵ was coined to describe this particular nexus of *knowledge/power/space*, and his approach in this has since been described as ‘talking of local discursivities, the local capillaries of power or the local character of critique.’⁶ While we might be more familiar with the terms *local heritage* and *local culture*, some benefit may be gained from the modern critical approaches in that they provide starting points,

³ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France* (New York: Picador, 2003).

⁴ This formulation was based upon European local history, and its grounding in a series of wars.

⁵ More usefully, Foucault’s *bellicose relations* has subsequently been called *belligerent history*. See Chris Philo, ‘Bellicose History’ and ‘Local Discursivities’: An Archaeological Reading of Michel Foucault’s *Society Must be Defended*, in *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, ed. by Jeremy M. Crampton and Stuart Elden (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 341-367

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

as possible directions of investigation and, at the very least, encouragement to continue strengthening regional self-respect.

Heritage and Traditional Culture

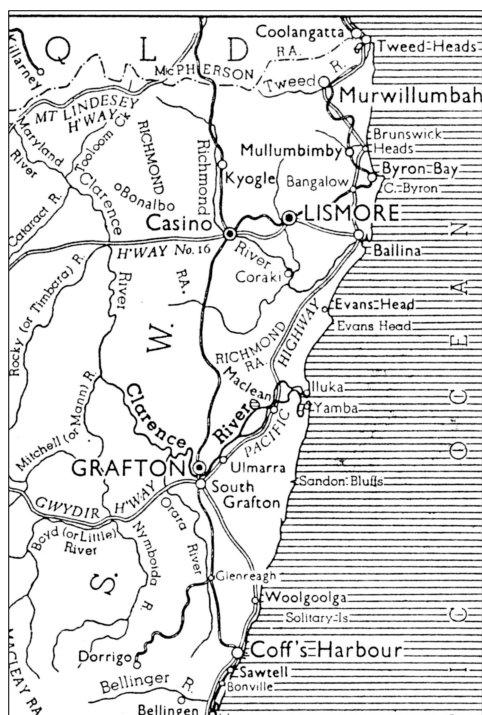
The nature of such heritage or traditional culture in the regions is prone to difficulties in definition. In media representations, often it is a brief reflection to the urban centres of their own views of the particular region (or, indeed, more often of ‘regions’ in general). For regional purposes (usually business) there is some attempt to indicate distinctiveness—for example, in tourism’s need to present a product which is different from that of other regions. But these are selective presentations for outsiders. How locals think about and feel about their region can differ markedly for such outsiders’ views—indeed, locals may slightly cringe when detail from such presentations is mentioned. One can go further here, with support from the UK theorist, the late Professor Raymond Williams, and his concept of culture as a *structure of feeling*.⁷ In Williams’ formulation much of what we term *culture* is felt rather than put into words. Nonetheless, whatever the mix of knowledge and feeling, there are core elements which are handed on across generations, while peripheral elements, which do not suit the needs and circumstances of the newer generation, are progressively abandoned. To engage with the people of a region is to support the fuller range of heritage, both conscious and unconscious.

And the (Regional) Universities’ Role?

Linking a community’s traditional culture, conscious and unconscious, with the activity of a regional university might seem more of a disjunction. Universities have always looked outwards—the earliest universities, with their spiritual inquiry, might be said to have looked upwards. Whether their concerns have been of the broader cultural, or of the eternal and theological, universities have always presented pathways of thought and values beyond whatever is the particular ‘local’. Even the name, *university*, is a reminder of its origins as *universitas*, ‘the whole’ of knowledge. When much current public interest is taken up with issues of globalisation—nationalisms, shifting assertions and alliances, and the nature of borders, and all this in unprecedented ways—then it might seem strange for a university to maintain one eye on the local and the regional.

Yet, a university has always represented a link between the local and the universal. Looking to J.H. Newman’s series of lectures, consolidated

⁷ Williams, Raymond, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), pp. 48-49.



Map of the north-east portion of New South Wales, which includes various campuses of Southern Cross University. From the south, these are Coffs Harbour, Lismore, Tweed Heads and Coolangatta.

in *Idea of a University* (1858), the seminal work which has long defined a 'modern' university, one can see there what is essentially an elaborate exploration of the cultural growth that would come to the local (in this case sorely repressed Catholic Ireland)⁸ through the development there of a university (the Catholic University of Ireland). While some institutions might underplay the role of locality, for a regional university, serving their regions is their very *raison d'être*.

Even with articulated mission statements and laudable aims when staff are sent/ encouraged to work in this direction, there are numerous factors which can affect the detail of the relationship between a regional university and its community. For example, the pursuit of knowledge is almost axiomatically a pursuit of that of which we are conscious. However, in a regional setting, such a pursuit can come up against that which is locally firmly felt, but largely unconscious. And hints of this shared feeling may emerge when a university outsider's efforts to direct/ persuade the local community, or to 'fit in', do not quite work. Such problems would reduce over (long) time—for example, at the nation's oldest regional university, the University of New England (1954), with its many long-serving staff, and a firm tradition of adult/ community-learning and outreach, and where many publications, exhibitions and displays remind all of the deep 'strata' of previous significant activity. The list of activities in their Heritage Futures Centre's Research/Annual Report, for example, is of a scale at which one of the smallest of the nation's universities could only marvel.

Alternatively, consideration of the heritage activity of a small and recently-established university may show already, in skeletal form, the

⁸ It would long be known as University College, Dublin, as distinct from the Protestant Trinity College.

principles of such engagement. Adjoining the area of U.N.E. is Southern Cross University—a smaller coastal institution established, initially, as a Teachers' College in 1970. Just how small, in the area of heritage, can be seen from the staffing—only two full-time staff members write in the area/field of local/ regional history/ culture. Taking a broader sweep, one might add one former staff member who continues to write histories; up to three part-time staff who are active in the field with local heritage projects. Undergraduate study of History is not always offered, and so there is but an irregular flow of student regional history projects.

However, it is not staff or students that are now my focus, but, rather, the activity and the evolving nature of it over recent decades—and in that way a small regional university can perhaps throw into greater highlight the nature of links with a modern regional community.

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Early Efforts

In a formal sense, the university's antecedent institutions made numerous approaches to link with its community. Its roots may be traced through the U.N.E. Regional Office (from c. 1958-1970). The original Teachers College buildings were located in the main shopping block of the city, making it an easy venue for what were termed 'lunchtime forums', where the community was welcomed with interesting topics, stimulating speakers, and community responses/ participation welcomed. To some degree these activities found more permanent expression in the establishment of an Institute of Aboriginal Community Development.⁹ Next was the publication of local heritage broadsheets,¹⁰ which today can be seen as cautious, focusing upon certain elements of the region's past—settlement, primary industry and transport. Yet they appeared in print for over thirty years, and by their very ubiquity, in school and library displays, they made regional history seem both a knowable and a natural activity.

Associated with the Institute was the collection of the records of Indigenous peoples. This evolved into a 'Keeping Place'—a repository of predominantly anthropological works concerned with regional peoples—which continues today. In these activities, the academic activity could be seen by the community as playing an enabling role. In the sourcing of material, its interpretation and presentation one can see a

⁹ Ray Bass, *Education in Lismore: A Century and a Quarter of Progress* (Lismore, NSW: Northern Rivers College of Advanced Education, 1980), pp. 171-172.

¹⁰ Ray Bass, *Teachers College to University: Higher Education on the North Coast of NSW 1970-1992* (Lismore, NSW: University of New England-Northern Rivers, 1992), pp. 50-52.

respectful courtesy to the feelings of the community—at the same time as some of the structure of that feeling was being revealed.

Stimulating Local Studies for Schools

In the 1990s, the then largest course, Primary Education, took on a local history project as part of the preparation for teaching Social Studies curriculum. With many modifications, this task continues today, and it remains one of the most popular assignments with students. Here a local area was chosen by each student (usually from within the North Coast region), and a procedure for researching that location's heritage was given. In preparing a work suitable for classroom use, primary sources needed to be consulted and then incorporated. These primary sources were usually maps or newspapers, but also, where available, local literature or quality non-fiction (*belles lettres*) needed to be used.

This view of heritage is not limited to works where the impulse is predominantly historical. Heritage can also include impressions, the (novelists') development of imagination, the record of fuller—and inner—life lived in the particular locality. Although the final product was limited in scope to the literacy needs of a Primary School class, the process builds upon the place-attachment feelings of the beginning teachers;¹¹ it empowers them to explore and then to present a resource, in effect, to their younger selves. Here the heritage is truly in local hands (and hearts), and the university provides the process of study and the appropriate rigour. The need for such works has long been recognised by school-teachers—consider the large number of communities where their (often only) published local history was written by a local teacher, or that sub-set where a community's only history is that of the local school written for its own anniversary. Additionally the SCU approach was inspired by the 1970s work of Lionel Gilbert,¹² and today it continues to be informed by recent (often international) scholarship in the field.¹³ Annually there are more than 200 university students at SCU producing such assignments in and about the region.

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¹¹ As well as attachment to the environment, natural and built, this can also be largely to the people. See David M. Hummon, 'Community Attachment: Local Sentiment and Sense of Place', in *Place Attachment*, ed. by Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low (New York; London: Plenum Press, 1992), pp. 253-278.

¹² See Lionel A. Gilbert and William P. Driscoll, *History Around Us: An Enquiry Approach to Local History* (Sydney: Hicks Smith and Sons, 1974), with 2nd ed. 1984, by Methuen.

¹³ Such as James M. Cahalan, 'Teaching Hometown Literature: A Pedagogy of Place', *College English*, Jan. 2008, 70.3, 249-274. Lionel Gilbert was a lecturer at Armidale Teachers College and after its transformation into Armidale C.A.E.

Newspapers

As newspapers were a popular primary source, it was noted that only the two large centres of Lismore and Grafton were well covered with this resource in microfilm. Other large North Coast centres were either patchily covered or, more often, not at all.¹⁴ Based upon the demonstrated interests of the student-teachers, a plan to expand these holdings was implemented, and over the last ten years a nearly comprehensive collection has been developed. As with all universities, such resources are open to public access, and so, a community scholar who wishes to study the daily texture of past life in the region no longer has to leave the region to do so.

And so to Our Heritage Conference

While the few historians may be research active, and likewise the large number of student-teachers who are concerned to identify the region's heritage, the university has also provided a focus for scholars from other topic areas. Those who study tourism often move their attention to heritage (the concept of 'destination culture'), as do environmental scientists (their concern with attitudes to place, and also with environmental change over time). These interdisciplinary approaches drew together in a university-sponsored conference in 1999,¹⁵ which specifically addressed the concept of *heritage*.

Several papers then were directly focussed on North Coast topics—six of the thirty eight in the published version have distinctively regional titles. These were outnumbered by titles from other regions. However examples and discussion throughout the conference gave many opportunities to address North Coast regional aspects. More broadly, such a large-scale conference drew many outside scholars, and gave prominence and some greater authority to the very concept of heritage. There was also a foregrounding of the indigenous presence, from the traditional Welcome and engaged participation of three local Elders (including a paper by Ron Heron and artwork separately presented by Agnes Roberts and Fay Smith—artwork vividly reproduced inside the covers of the published version). Again, as with the earliest university-predecessor efforts, one can see the presentation of a broad field for participation, without presumption or intrusion upon the local 'structure of feeling'—and thereby more effective in the roles of 'our' community enabling as well as encouragement.

¹⁴ By contrast, the long-established U.N.E. has near comprehensive newspaper holdings (at least of the early years) of this as well as its own area. For many years U.N.E. had the whole north of New South Wales as its remit and developed resources to serve that region.

¹⁵ *Heritage Landscapes: Understanding Place and Communities*, ed. by Maria Cotter, Bill Boyd and Jane Gardiner (Lismore, NSW: Southern Cross University Press, 2001).

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And What of Flood?

If the Indigenous heritage is largely held by a small group (albeit in part a moral core to the whole community), perhaps the major defining characteristic of the North Coast—one in which all inhabitants actively participate, or at least acknowledge—is its propensity to floods. From an outside perspective, floods are the feature which has most often drawn the attention of metropolitan (or national) media—where the helicopter reports, now several times a year, echo the past's (less-frequent) Movietone newsreels. From a local perspective, floods involve caution, additional work or discomfort, and always have the potential for disaster, or (it must be said) for enjoyment. The necessary practicalities can be informed by direct knowledge of the past, or indirectly where longer-term knowledge has been entrusted to us by elders no longer with us. In this way our heritage of 'floods' becomes important in identity-forming—

In Lismore, flooding is the ground upon which many people make a claim to 'knowing their place', a claim to local knowledge.¹⁶

For 'outsiders' from a university, engaging with this issue might be fraught with the presumptive—the seemingly inappropriate or shallow commentary. Rather than the centrepiece being a conference, which would draw input from more outsiders, here our activity was focussed on those aspects which would enable participation by the community. There was broad community consultation, regional history investigations, and the collection of oral history. The major production, in conjunction with the regional professional theatre group, was the writing and performance or a community play. This performance involved the audience walking those streets of downtown Lismore which had been regularly and severely affected by floods—the walking journey punctuated by various 'stations'.¹⁷

There were two public performances of this work (significantly around Easter, 2004), and both drew enormous crowds of locals. Particularly gripping was the video-playback 'station', showing recordings of elder locals interviewed on their direct (and passed-on) experience of local floods. So powerful were these oral history accounts,

¹⁶ Adele Wessel, 'Timescapes: Flooding and Memory'. In P. Thom (Ed.), *Flood: Essays Across the Current* (Lismore, NSW: Southern Cross University Press, 2004), pp. 201-210 (p. 202).

¹⁷ Some had noted the parallel to the Stations of the Cross along the Via Crucis at Easter tide.

that on each night a sizeable proportion of the audience refused to move on to the next 'station'—preferring to stay with the video-loop. Publishing projects involved a detailed website as well as a book of linked essays—with examples both local as well as from elsewhere, combined with consideration of the broader concepts.¹⁸

Here most of the contributors were from the university, but one notes the strong local connections/commitment of these writers. In this example the university can be seen as helping the community to address a concept that was locally distinctive and often distressing as well as identity-forming. And then SCU was playing a strong role in presenting that concept in its broader context, as well as regionally-defining, as well as recording local oral history.

Office of Regional Engagement

Of course, any university which saw its regional mission as 'core' would not be satisfied in leaving community engagement to the fluctuations in individual staff members' interests/activities. In 2005 a carefully badged Office of Regional Engagement (ORE) was established, in order to give a focus for dialogue and to support the brokering of community/university arrangements. While the function of this Office covered the full range of university activities—business, science, tourism, health, education—it was particularly successful in cultural matters. Here, disparate community groups (often themselves subject to fluctuations in the commitment/activity of key volunteers) found a committed and stable partner in the university.

In the field of visible/ located heritage, one key project for the university's Office of Regional Engagement was close cooperation with Lismore City Council on the 'Wilsons River Experience Walk'.¹⁹ From being the means of first entry into the region by sawyers and settlers, for most of the region's history its many rivers remained the major routes of contact with the outside world. Perhaps in the way that rail transport helped to define many inland regions' sense of their connection to the outside world, and their sense of their level of importance to that larger world, so North Coast eyes have always watched their rivers in a way that goes beyond the concern with floods.

¹⁸ *Flood: Essays Across the Current*, ed. by P. Thom (Lismore, NSW: Southern Cross University Press, 2004).

¹⁹ Heritage is a large component of this overall project, which will be 10-15 years long, with funding from 12-15 million dollars. See full details, including the panels, and plans for the remaining two thirds of the project, from the local government site. Lismore City Council, Wilsons River Experience Walk <http://www.lismore.nsw.gov.au/cmst/lcc002/view_doc.asp?id=4766&cat=28> [accessed 16 September 2009].



Wilson River Experience Walk. One of the three story sites showing the array of six panels, presented front and back. The Wilson River and bridge can be seen in the background.

And So to the Great Panels

With wide community consultation, particularly involving Indigenous leaders and local historians—an Historical Reference Group—a major heritage product to date is a series of large panels. There are sixteen large panels (each is 3.6 by 1.2 metres) and these are aggregated into three separate ‘story sites’. With thematic ‘slices’ these panels present the history of the community as related to the riverbank. The various panels are named:

- Guriabu... A Very, Long, Long, Long Time Ago...
- In the Womb of the Goanna: Widjabul Country
- Gudjam Na Bush Food
- Europeans in Bundjalung Country
- A Dynamic Landscape
- Lismore Station
- Downstream: Timber, Villages and the River
- South Lismore: The Western Bank
- River Crossings
- To the West
- Closer Settlement: Growing Cows

An Industrious Place... A Social Place
 Women and Children on the Richmond
 On the Riverbank: Same Place. Different Views
 Festivals and Processions... Celebrations

University expertise was crucial in the implementation of these installations, and included: historical research, interpretive text, the layout and visual impact, and assessing the needs of tourists. As the panels tell the story of the riverbank, from its deepest past, so there are many echoes from this past which can still be seen today. For the interpretive text looks to present a broad range of social life, within which one gains glimpses of the values, efforts and passions of past peoples in this place. As will be seen from the above list, clearly the link with the locality's Indigenous heritage is particularly strong and significant.

Here the engagement is much more powerful than so deemed previously. Starting with the communities' stories, interests and needs, the research has then probed these, and then presented it in ways that are accessible, valued and rewarding. The resource becomes a shared community form, one to revisit/transmit as the people may choose.

Local Histories

Stepping back from the detailed interactions that were and are brokered by the Office of Regional Engagement, it must be observed that the fuller detail of regional heritage can only come in substantial publications. A full-length overview history of a locality provides a solid range of topics, supporting detail, and then scholarly links that enable more specialised full-length follow-up histories to be more readily positioned. Two aspects of such overview histories are crucial—(i) that there is a sensitive and sustained attempt to identify the *genius loci* or distinctive local feeling; and, (ii) that the whole be made as accessible as possible to all in the surrounding community.

Just as many local histories are written by local schoolteachers, a pattern can be observed across the nation that cities with a regional university often have their local history written by a local university lecturer. As one of the authors of two overview histories located within this region,²⁰ the aims of identifying the *genius loci*, and then of accessibility, have been attempted in each work. While space precludes detail on more than one specific strategy for each purpose, these two

²⁰ Maurice Ryan, and Robert James Smith, *Time and Tide Again: A History of Byron Bay* (Lismore, NSW: Northern Rivers Press, 2001); and, *Lismore: From Lios Mor to Tuckurimba* (Lismore, NSW: Northern Rivers Press, 2006).

strategies show the value that may come from university-based researchers to a community history—

- The first is in access to wider resources—whether physical or electronic, or the systems of access—that enable the identification of resources that are distinctive, recognisable as local and with striking thematic relevance. Such resources provide novelty and accessibility.
- Secondly, university-based researchers can provide new eyes for interpretation. For example, the results of elections are often avoided in local histories—beyond a respectful list of elected members. However, for Lismore, an examination of the Referendum figures shows the WWI Conscription vote as YES 60:40, while regions to the south (Cowper) and west (New England) were NO. This high local support for Conscription links with local WWI enlistment figures, where totals were 50% higher than the comparable centres of Armidale and Bathurst. Similarly the anti-Communist referendum of 1951 was supported locally by much the same proportion as was Conscription many years earlier.

Identifying such data can be the starting point for interpretation—here identifying a key element of North Coast conservative identity, distinctive from that of its neighbouring regions, and passed on in many acts of tradition.²¹ Such overview histories provide a context for whole-community stories, interests or projects, for those of sectional groups, or of the individual.

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Clearly the details of such links between university and community are applicable in other regions and countries. In this way their many variations in history, current/past populations and needs may be better acknowledged and articulated. Towards encouragement of this approach, one may look for more events that formalise such links, such as at Memorial University Newfoundland where an international conference on 'The Arts and Cultural Heritage as Engines of Regional Development' is in plan.²² Within Australia most events on university/community links still tend to look only to commercial and infrastructure needs.²³

²¹ *Lismore: From Lios Mor to Tuckurimba*, pp. 75-79.

²² To be held 13-15 October, 2011. For details see <www.mun.ca/harriscentre/Conferences_Workshops/NAF/2011.php> [accessed 10 June 2009].

²³ Still, cultural issues can be addressed in such events. Consider the VIC Regional Engagement Forum (2004), which had a statewide scope, foregrounded business interests, but which was introduced by Michael J. Osborne, a distinguished scholar of Modern Greek, with interests in language contact, who presented a probing view of the overall role of a modern regional university. Business/Higher Education Round Table, Victorian

Why do Regional Identity Research?

Regionalism is essentially a rural phenomenon. While the activity of a regional university may all be very well for the particular region, and by extension for regions in general, one may ask what relevance does it have for urban Australians—particularly when most of Australia's population lives in large conurbations. Here the answer has to be contingent upon what is actually found and disseminated—first to a broader 'regional diaspora', those 'ex-locals' with ears and hearts to hear. For them, it would be helpful to know of the Far North Coast's distinctively high enlistment rate in World War I, which can be combined with data on the relatively stable population—still to experience the post-World War Two migration boom. Here one might see a continuity of the ANZAC spirit, albeit blown by the winds of national changes, debates and imperatives. Thus when the nation looks to the ANZAC spirit (as it has done in recent years as something which can draw together our many disparate peoples), and to a sense of duty on the global stage (the spirit of *Australia Will be There*, the best known of the patriotic songs, 1915),²⁴ in doing so it might justifiably look to the Northern Rivers to some extent as 'the keeper of the flame'.

Both Develop and Record Our Community

All development begins in pride, commitment and the recovery of identity. Thus, from the local perspective, this region might speak up in a way which might keep honest those national figures who are prone to mishandle our shared heritage in loose ways for their own purposes. A regional university can help its community to hold true to itself, its experience and its people's heritage and aspirations, and so attain national respect.

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See the Australian Government's official site Australian Government Culture Portal, Songs of War and Peace: Patriotic and Popular <<http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/song/warpatriotic/>> [accessed 8 October 2009].

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