

Two Different Histories: Same Place? Manilla, NSW

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ABSTRACT: A close study of a particular place's several histories—spaced out over the twentieth century—may well offer a sort of paradigm for the 'revisionist' interpretation of regional history writing. Regional history mediates between the public and the private, and it probably needs to be written with imagination, rather than bias, to achieve wider sympathy.

Slewings must come from rank-class, local politics, styles of business featured, the absence/presence of an historical perspective, an awareness of/tolerance for ethnic presences and differences. Later histories have more news/perspectives from the outside world, yet, and paradoxically, more local identity rather than national/ international materials. Later histories have more references to women and aborigines, but then a moving away of the younger members, and so that group not being 'news'. While all forms of local history are valid, they must correlate now to the given community's/paper's readership.

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Preamble

In this era of globalisation, local history is a genre that is becoming increasingly important in order to record the meaningful and indicative changes over time in Australian communities. A re-evaluation of the variety of ways in which information is recorded—and then to be shared with future generations—is of immense importance and significance within the broader context of social changes that have resulted from the much increased communication and travel possibilities now available. Whole populations have become increasingly transient, and this same transience has, paradoxically, made the likelihood of maintaining a physical connection to a single locality of nurture much less possible. As economic necessity and opportunity tear people from their roots, the relationship between identity and place has become both more difficult to maintain, while now being more important than ever before. The resurgence—and re-invention—of local history has emphasised the importance of personal memory of the local within the proliferation of global communications.

The local historical discourses are in themselves significant, and relevant, while also forming one thread of the historical discourse for

Australia and the world. The fascination of people from different parts of the globe with the daily lives of each other of their friends and acquaintances, has encouraged local history to evolve into a dynamic and varied collection of works which are expressed by means of different media.

And What Really is Local History Now?

Alan Rogers defines local history as being above that of the family and below that of the national (p. 14). It is also unequivocally below that of the state or regional history, in that it focuses on a smaller geographical and population base and is more likely to cross the divide between the public and private spheres. Manilla, situated well inland in northern New South Wales, is an example of a small Australian community that has had its history recorded for posterity. The initial settlement and foundation history, titled *Transformation of Manillae*, by Alton Richmond MacLeod, was published in 1949. A.R. MacLeod had moved to the town in 1912 to take up a role as a reporter for the sole local paper, the weekly *Manilla Express*. He lived the rest of his life in the town, working for twenty five years as the editor of the *Manilla Express*, and always and significantly contributing to the community, most notably, serving for over two decades on the town council (including sixteen years as Shire President) and raising his children in the town.

The second, 'updated' history of Manilla was written by Lindsay and Marion Bignall, the son-in-law and daughter of A.R. MacLeod, their work entitled *A History of Manilla: 1853-1979*, and it was published in 1980. Lindsay Bignall lived all his life in Manilla, while his wife Marion is still living in their home in Manilla. Marion has been an influential member and patron of the Manilla Historical Society, and at the age of ninety-four she is still actively contributes to the Royce Cottage Museum, the historical museum of the Manilla Historical Society.

And So to the Core Significance of These Related Texts

This article is concerned to explore the vision or pictures that emerge from each of the works and then it discusses their significance for a Manilla citizen of a later generation. It also examines them in an attempt to understand the philosophy/ significance of such local history and of its evolution. Regardless of their congruency, or otherwise, in approach, these two visions offer insight for an understanding of the concept of the place, Manilla, and has certain implications for an examination of the 'more philosophical/ bigger picture' of local history.

In her work on the economic history of Queanbeyan, NSW, Susan Mary Withycombe indicated the privileged place that local history texts

have within small communities. Her concentration on the economic history of the community places Withycombe, it seems, as one who considers there to be a distinction between the ‘real’ local, cultural and social histories of a place, as opposed to the stylized hagiographic histories of a community (p. 122). However, the problem is not the legitimacy of status distinctions between types of local history—indeed, Withycombe’s position is relatively rare, for she assumes the legitimacy of local history as a genre—but rather that most Australian articles on the subject are more concerned with local history actually being produced at all. Moreover, Donovan cites critics who address the disparities between urban and regional history, but, in doing so, lump together a number of small communities with the underlying assumption that local history does not function as a separate genre of history (p. 20). Yet critics do this to the detriment of considering how local histories have been reviewed and refashioned over time or of noting carefully the critical approaches taken by different authors.

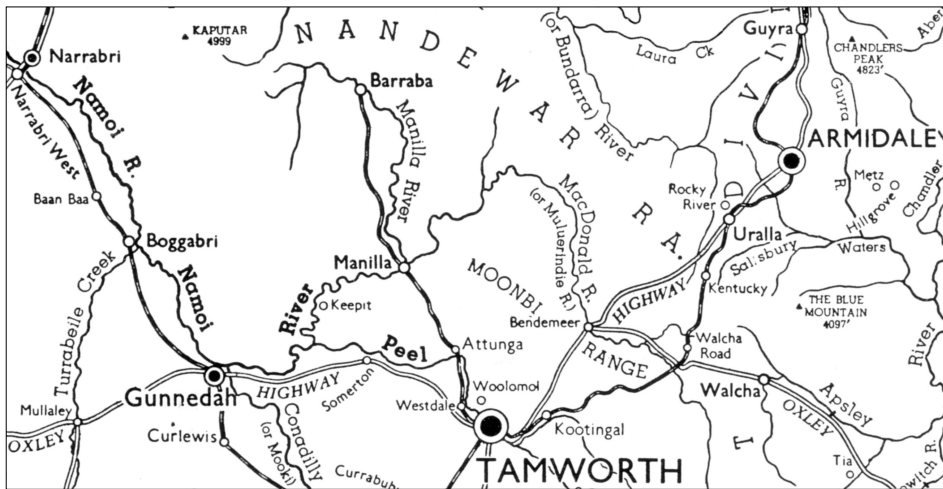
And How Does One Write a Local History?

There are a number of ‘how to’ write local history books, which discuss where to find information and give a clear methodology designed to assist in writing a ‘history’ of a place (Geeves; Finberg). Significantly, each such ‘textbook’ advocates its own methodology for a ‘correct’ local history. In accordance with some of these models, a handful of historians have written five or more ‘local histories’ about various communities around New South Wales. The attempts in the 1950’s to the 1970’s to have histories recorded for prosperity and celebration would appear to be responsible for this mass production of equivalent histories. These histories are almost templates of each other, with only the specific details and facts changing with the new council seal and coat of arms. In response to the contention that there is a ‘correct’ local history and in evaluation of the template style of local history, Peter Donovan contends that:

Few historians recognise the connections between the multitude of different influences that acted upon any community during a time period. Many use an encyclopedic approach & write mini histories of industries, churches or sporting groups with no evidenced links between them. (p. 36)

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Map showing Manilla, NSW (left of centre) in relation to the major centres of Tamworth and Armidale.

And the Identity/ Connectedness of a Place

By arguing in this manner, Donovan's approach is starting to move towards the more sentient and profitable recent debate regarding the writing of local history. One historian who takes a radical and integrated approach is the iconoclastic Peter Read. He combines community and cultural history with the sensations of connection and identity that is bound up within the concept and space of place. Read's approach differs in each of his works depending on the topic and place of research. The approach taken by Read in using oral histories and privileging the voices of ordinary people apart from the institutional records is invaluable in enabling the historian to take a more lateral and imaginative approach to the construction of local history. Tom Griffiths of the Australian National University would argue that the use of imagination and good writing to make local history accessible for a wider audience is a positive outcome and is consequently evident in his own writing of local history from an environmental perspective (p. 132).

Refashioning of Local and History, and the Reader as Participant

Re-evaluation and refashioning of local history is more than just taking a revisionist approach or debating the factual basis of the genre of local history, it is about developing or qualifying the angles of your approach to a chosen subject. Initially, like James Clifford, I was interested in understanding the 'location among others in time and space' with myself as a reference (p. 301). The placement of myself within these visions is integral to my interpretation of the visions created and in

understanding the evolution of the genre of local history. Just as the author has biases, so does the reader, and thus it is that their own situation in time and place will inextricably effect their construction of place.

The way in which local history can be written depends largely on the interests and the biases of the author. The interests of an author who is from a family of the town will be different from an outside commissioned historian. In the case of Manilla, the two histories were written by members of the same family: a family which was involved in local government and local journalism for some fifty years of the town's history. This would be, I contend, a different history to one written by an historian whose family had also spent five generations in the area, if they were graziers and businessmen rather than, say, part of the town aristocracy, or of the elected community leadership.

The writing of local history is also coloured by the sources that are used. The use of community members' recollections can prove to be valuable if used along with other contemporary primary sources. These texts concentrate on numerical analysis and tend not to extrapolate social or cultural history from the sources apart from any writing that was done at the time. This is in contrast with recent local historians like Janet McCalman who have analysed their sources with questioning eyes particularly within the social and cultural context (p. 4).

Visions of a Small Country Town

Local history, like any form of history, is very much about change over time. Local history specifically reviews an area or locality and it is generally centred on the people who move in and out of that place. Manilla is a small community in North West New South Wales. It is located 40 kilometres north of the regional centre Tamworth and 350 kilometres north-north-west of the state capital, Sydney, is situated on the banks of the Namoi and Manilla Rivers, and it currently has approximately 3000 residents.

Vision—MacLeod (1949)

This vision of Manilla is one of a pioneering and settler community; an agricultural community that is thriving with the township growing bigger every year. It is a community settled near river junctions that offer fertile and prosperous lands and the 'local aristocratic' family, the Baldwins, are highly influential in the town. Strongly involved in the rhetoric of state parliamentary representation as they are, there is here some real evidence of the law controlling the community (pp. 45-59, 60-67).

The citizens of Manilla are here described as eagerly supporting the public education system, while the Sisters of St Joseph carry out their work ‘quietly, but effectively’ (p. 74). This, then, is a vision of community with strong religious ties, with no less than five Christian denominations commissioning and consecrating places of worship. The community thus portrayed is also one involved in a wide variety of main bridges in the late 1880s—these highlighted as being important to the transportation and mobility of the town’s citizens, thereby putting an end to the treacherous river crossings and improving produce and stock movement around the district.

The business community was well established prior to 1949 with no less than forty businesses listed as being established in the community for twenty years or more. It is very clear that the emphasis is on this community as a most useful agricultural production centre. There are chapters headed ‘tobacco’, ‘cereals’, ‘irrigation’, ‘rainfall’, and ‘pastoral’, the transportation of produce in and out of the town occurring by the using of both the railway and also road transport. While there is mention of the Tamworth stock sales and the Sydney markets, there is very little other discussion about destination markets or comment on influential factors like weather, crop disease, or rains and their on local harvest yields. For example, no comment is made on the tables which show that the Great Depression seemed not to have reduced the grain tonnage through the rail depot by more than 5%; in fact the revenue about 1930 was actually up on the 1925 figure. Moreover, there is almost no mention of the effects of the Depression on the local community or business interests (p. 130).

Instead, important events retold include the reported sighting of the first rabbit in the area in June 1899 (p. 137). Macleod then traces the evolution of the rabbit from a novelty, recognition as a pest, and finally refers to its harvesting as a commodity; for, at the industry’s peak in 1932, over 1.5 million were treated at the local freezing works.

The vision, then, is of an English settler community with surnames deriving from Irish, Scottish, English, and Welsh heritage. There are a small number of references to names of Italian or Greek origin (p. 88). Furthermore, the only reference to the Aboriginal people within the area is within a stylised account of the exploration of the region by John Oxley and the aboriginal ‘wild man’ that opens the text. There is no reference to Aborigines as members of the community—they were stockmen and labourers—even under the chapter somewhat honestly styled/ headed ‘colonisation’.

This is a vision centred in the respectable section of the community, particularly on the upper class and looking around at the important constituent parts in the author’s view. Participation of local people in national or international events is a major criterion for the inclusion of

those events in this history. References to major events in the greater world are usually discussed as an aside to an important local concern:

When war broke out in 1939 wire netting of properties and subdivision fences of netting had begun to effect clearances where landowners were determined to get rid of rabbits. (p. 67)

In this text, the local is placed as the major focus in any discussion of the global. The two world wars (and the Boer war) have their own chapter; however it is somewhat anachronistically entitled ‘national service’ and is concerned with the local involvement in the world event, with little or no commentary on the wider situation (p. 67).

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A More Emotive Vision –the Bignalls (1980)

Much of the history of the years up to 1950 was taken directly from the first text. However, it was refashioned and rewritten to be a concise celebratory institutional and community history. This text shows a community that has grown with the changes in modern society that still looks sentimentally back on ‘those that blazed the trail’ (Bignall and Bignall, p. 1). Manilla is a town that owes its present state ‘to the early settlers’ courage, vision and determination’ (p. 5). This is also a town that had access very quickly to emerging technology despite its position and size, and so the speed at which the telegraph, telephone, motorcar and electric light appeared after their introductions into Australia are highlighted.

This is a vision that can be placed in the middle class and local government areas of the community social structure, looking out and around at the significant and relevant areas of impact. This history is very celebratory of community development and concentrates on the achievements of middle and upper class local residents, even if they occurred after they had long moved from the community. All references to national and international events are qualified and framed in the understanding that the most interesting and important details are in the areas where residents participated or contributed (pp. 16-25). The small numbers of references to links between Manilla and other towns and cities in the region is representative of the almost inconsequential role that they play in this so sharply focused history. The voices and the important events emphasised by this text create a vision that has obvious frames of reference for these historians so focused on their community. Federal politics are not noted at all, the text including no reference to the constitutional crisis of 1975 or to any changes in the elected federal government.

The Main Street Focus

The hub and centre of this history is the town and ‘main street’ business interests and the rural pursuits of the agricultural families that associate themselves with/ as being from Manilla (p. 80). Links to the region are present, but as seen as a mere extension of the daily lives of the residents rather than Manilla being reliant on, or integrated with, Tamworth, Attunga or Barraba.

The Book That is Referred to/Enforces Their Perceptions

A large number of current residents of Manilla reference their knowledge of local history to the *History of Manilla*. The personal involvement by Marion Bignall in the local historical society has given the text a privileged place in the eyes and minds of many long-term residents. Even one of the local icons, town character David Ridgewell, qualified his assistance saying that if he didn’t know about an area of local history, then ‘Marion would know.’

Methodological Approaches in Writing about Manilla

Both texts acknowledge that much of the ‘history’ is gathered from the text of the local newspaper, the *Manilla Express*. Consequently, much of both histories read as somewhat stylised—yet factual accounts. There is very little use of voices other than that of the narrator, except for the occasional reference to a letter, personal papers or diary. The generational aspect and the refashioning of research into a new history also provide interesting consideration. The range of sources referred to and the way the narrators are authoritative in these texts creates a sense of there being one story only. There is also reference to use of the *Government Gazette* as a source at various points and the use of the *Tamworth News* for the period before the establishment of the *Manilla Express*. While Manilla is not a town in isolation, the MacLeod histories particularly reference the relationship between Manilla and surrounding communities, Barraba and Tamworth, in either sporting or electoral boundary terms (p. 61).

The Express is used to constitute the authority for much of both works; and this is interesting because of the role that MacLeod had as editor of this paper for twenty-five years until 1948. The history as presented by the paper is defended by these two authors and used as authoritative and is supported by them when they present as the authoritative account of an event, and when they preface the text with the acknowledgment that much of their knowledge was gained through this one source.

And the Photographic Record

There are a number of photographs of local landmarks and residents in both examples. Many of the photos are as further explanation to the text; however, there are some that seem to be randomly or arbitrarily chosen to be part of the work without any apparent significance, particularly in *Transformation of Manillae*. The use of visual aids in local history has increased over time commensurate with the improvements and ease of technology.

More and Newer Methodologies Available

The range of methodologies open to the local historian has grown over the years. Indeed, a current local historian also has access to media like the Internet, which presents another view of the time that would never have been imagined, even when the second history was published in 1980. The use and range of sources is integral to creating a vision of the place being studied. The inclusion or omission of certain voices and the authority of the narrative all give rise to a creation of the confident community that comes alive in the texts.

But Another Manilla?

The significance of these two visions of Manilla is that, while they are parts of the same history, they show a different angle and, ostensibly, a different place. The two visions that emerge from the Macleod and Bignall histories influence and are significant for a third vision, a vision created by the audience. This resultant vision is tangibly linked to the first two visions, but it is biased and influenced by many other factors including education, oral history and the voices that are privileged. The omissions of the voices of immigrants, Aborigines and the common man show the two earlier histories as being more of/ focused on the local government social stratum, rather than being a local history of the town itself and its people. The simplification of the role of the St Joseph's convent community in the life of the Manilla asks serious questions, given they were still present in the town until the early 1990's. The role of the many women in the community is largely underwritten or omitted.

The 2009 vision of Manilla is different again to the two visions discussed. The railway stopped running in 1984 and road transport is the sole transport used. Tourism levels have vastly increased and now provide a million dollar industry to the town that simply didn't exist twenty years ago. The rate of young adults in the town is very low, indeed in 1991 the census recorded that there were no 18-25 year olds living in the town who were studying at tertiary level, and there were only fifteen living in the town at all (New South Wales Office of Youth Affairs, p. 7). The town has an ageing population that is offset only by the increasing percentage of couples moving to Manilla to have families

in the quiet small town environment while still being close enough to commute to Tamworth for work.

What Should We Conclude from the Above Matters/ Characteristics?

What local history represents in historical terms is largely dependant on the reader's relationship with the subject/ or with the place itself. Using Manilla as an example to make broader statements and to consider wider implications of the writing of local history and the evaluation of it, there is also an opportunity and a challenge as an author to explore and develop the relevance and impact my position, placement and background have on my analysis.

Manilla is my home town, though even I have not lived here for close to a decade. I feel that my own sense of identity is bound up in this place and its rural surrounds. Branches of my family tree have been living in Manilla for five, six and seven generations respectively. My father's family has only recently sold land that we had lived on since the 1890's. The first members of my mother's family settled in the area in 1828 and include Edwin 'Charles' Baldwin, my great, great, great grandfather, one of the pioneering members of the Baldwin family. I feel there a sense of intimacy and belonging that I have in no other place. I lived on our family property till I was twelve years of age, when my parents moved us 'into town' to further their business interests. I have a strong personal connection with this land, and as a child I explored and walked around the property fascinated by it all. When we moved into town, I missed being on the farm and the quiet and tranquility I had always known. I grew up though, knowing the names of every one on my street and knew my way around all the streets in the town.

Manilla is a peaceful and gentle place, and while it had modern connections to the outside world with the telephone and Internet, it still remains in a mobile phone black spot. It is a place where you can go to disappear for a while, though you will be not without a 'town' identity nor fail to be noticed or acknowledged there, even though while there you are almost hidden from the rest of the country. It is a wonderful place to grow up, a community that prides itself on lending a hand and in taking an interest in each other's lives (sometimes too much), and generally it was a nurturing and comfortable environment. It seemed insular when I was a teenager, though with so many international visitors the town has taken on a slightly different feel with residents continuing their activities alongside a never-ending flow of heavily accented backpackers and wealthy adventure seekers.

The History That Records My Relatives Gives Much Pleasure

There are a large number of references within both texts to members of my own family, including my mother and my grandparents. As a

university-educated female with strong emotional, spiritual and family links, my biases and response to the ‘visions’ of the history of my community are, alike, passionate. In front of a backdrop of revisiting the history and the approaches to the writing of local history there—or as a test case—the extent of this significance and the effects of these snapshots on my own understanding of the social and cultural history of the town is yet to be fully determined.

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Writing Local History

The use of Manilla as an example for the concerns of writing local history encourages questions regarding the ways in which local histories are written and their definition. These examples of the fashioning and refashioning of local history in Manilla are useful in examining local history as a discipline. The impact that personal experience and distance has on the writing of the historian can also be seen. This examination is also an interesting exercise in looking at specimens of local history, while suspending questions of validity and accepting that all constructions of local history are specimens of this type of history and are inherently valid. Some types are still privileged, though this is not by any means other than an arbitrary consideration by others who give them meaning. All forms of local history, be it environmental, cultural, social, socio-economic, ethnographic, autobiographical, or textually probing are all valid, and they all present different visions to their audience/readership.

One of the central questions in analysing the approaches and narrative presented in the two separate histories is determining what constitutes local history and who sets the boundaries. Local history of a place is separate from the wider national context, in that there needs to be importance and significance given to the place in a way that is appropriate for that place. This does not detract or change the place within the national context that local history also has, it is both a whole and a piece within the national history.

In my analysing the vision and picture of a small community presented by two historians and also by the use of the primary source material from the same community, the definition of local history and its purpose are—and must be—an individual’s constructs and, therefore, this leads to/ takes cognizance of very varied approaches and outcomes. And David Potts argues that the [community] narrative approach to history is a more advantageous approach than ethnographic history (p. 20).

Conclusion

In analysing the examples of the local history of Manilla, the historian is able to see a paradigm of the development and evolution of [rural community] Australian local history. These examples taken from a small town help the historian to understand the trends and writing of local history. Broadly speaking, the writing of local history has changed in its focus since the first example of local history analysed here was published in 1949. One of the larger implications of investigating and writing the local history of Manilla is that the community references/ may be seen to be referencing itself from these histories. Even more importantly than the whole community so referencing themselves, there is the fact that the individuals begin to set themselves in context, and consequently the local audience sees not only where they come from but also who they are. Local history becomes the facts whether so in reality or not.

The two 'visions' of Manilla present two different towns in the sense that they are of places in different times and that they focus on certain voices and omit others. They are angles of perspective on the same picture and draw the same landscape in different ways, in 1949 and in 1980. For the next generations, local histories are integral and invaluable in shaping affirming notions of place and identity.

The local and global dichotomy is also an influence on the relevance and interest taken in local history and in the many stories each community has to tell of itself. The validity of local histories as specimens of the experience and bias of the author is unquestionable, they will become increasingly more diverse and the readership more varied and questioning of the social and cultural importance of daily events to history and the impact of local histories on our understanding of created knowledge. The benefit and significance of examining these two examples are invaluable in learning about how to construct and understand any/ a particular local history.

The evolution of the local history genre from local history for residents' sentimental celebrations to social and cultural treatises is the result of the widening importance to the global community of the local experience. Looking at these local visions of an Australian local town helps the historian to understand local history/ most histories through omissions as much as the privileged and highlighted voices.

The bias and personal connection of an author is inherent in the writing of a local history, even in situations where a person so writing argues they have no connection or personal stake in the outcomes. The placement of myself, the author and my own 'connection' to this place—Manilla—is also to show that in discussing the emergence of a community through the visions created by local history the audience is constructing another vision. The visions of the next generation are

affected and shaped. In essence my vision was created in part by the other two visions of local history. Changes in the construction of the local history of Manilla over time have been significant and possess their own intrigues. Continued interest in their future development and the importance of their production may well be impacted by the pervasive influence of the globalisation of the world's population.

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