

Wither Local History in the Academy?  
The shifting historiography in Local Studies in  
Australian Universities  
and among Independent Researchers

Neville Buch MPHA (Qld)



Nocturnal, instrument used to determine the local time. Photo 219941168 © Heritage Pictures | Dreamstime.com



Former Social Worker and Chancellor (2001-2004 )  
Fay Marles and students at the University of Melbourne.  
University of Melbourne Archives/Dr Neville Buch's OVC  
PowerPoint Collection

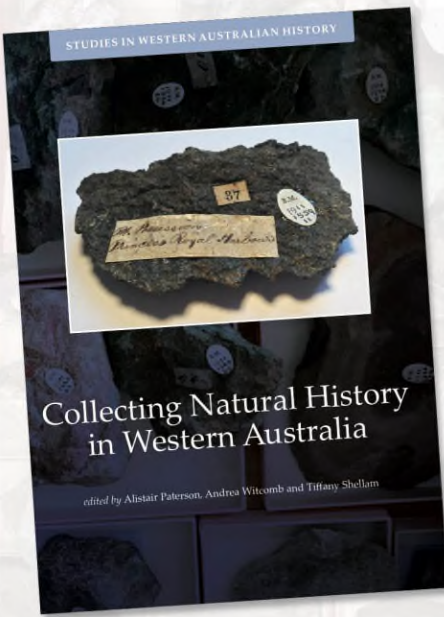


In Memoriam – Dr Rod Fisher UQ HAPI. 5 July 2017

Leading Australian Historian of Local Studies

Image: Professor Martin Stuart-Fox, Professor Malcolm Thomis and Dr Fisher,  
in February 1996

Very few Australian universities currently teach or research in state, that is, regional, or local history. There was a time in the 1990s when Australian academic historians worked more diligently in local studies and shared the view that the history work was for everyone, with a wide-ranging thematic agenda, including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groupings, and migrant and refugee groupings.



**STUDIES IN WESTERN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY**

**Collecting Natural History in Western Australia**

edited by Alistair Paterson, Andrea Witcomb and Tiffany Shellam

**Collecting Natural History in Western Australia**

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The Centre for Western Australian History engages with WA’s diverse histories and identities through facilitating historical research and presentation to the highest professional standards.



The state of play for local studies has been greatly redacted at Australian universities in the last two decades. In research, it appears that only the Centre for Western Australian History exists. At the end of the last century University of Queensland abandoned the Centre for Applied History, although the powers of the university would argue that it was transformed into the Centre for the Queensland Government with a large million-dollar grant from Premier Peter Beattie. There are a few fallacious arguments that institutions have used to defend the strategic shift in the curriculum and research focus.



The Heritage building 'University Hall'. Photo 127051853 / Heritage University Sydney © Bundit Minramun | Dreamstime.com



The Guard Tower in Port Arthur Historic Site, UNESCO heritage, in Tasman Peninsula, Tasmania. Photo 49970771 / Heritage Tasmania © Bennymarty | Dreamstime.com



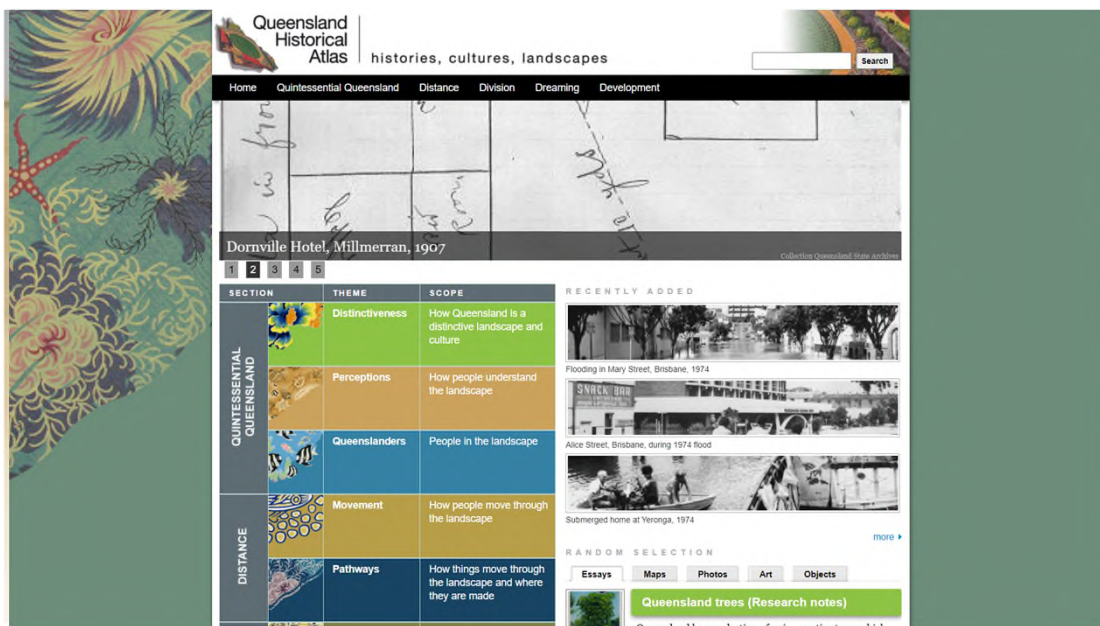
University of Queensland. Educational institution in Brisbane, Australia. Photo 163302048 © Tupungato | Dreamstime.com



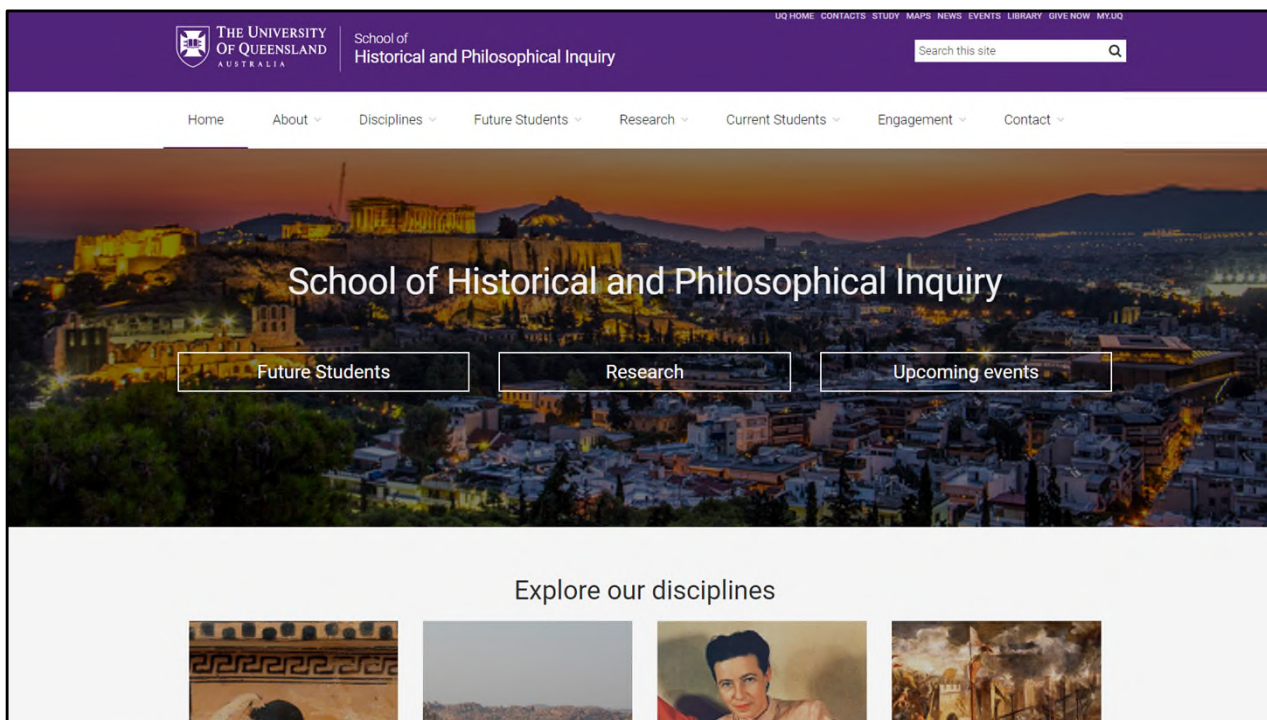
Winthrop Hall and Clock Tower University of Western Australia. Photo 38123695 / Heritage University © DuncanSharrocks | Dreamstime.com

The first and foremost argument is that there has been no substantial impact for local studies. It is true that three universities had or has local studies courses on their books:

- University of Sydney had or has HSTY1001 - History Workshop; HSTY2631 - Sin City? A History of Sydney
- University of Tasmania had or has HTA380 History and Cultural Heritage
- University of Western Australia had or has HERI5101 Debates in Contemporary Heritage Studies



The argument for the Centre for the Government of Queensland, at the University of Queensland, is even more fallacious with the partnership with the Queensland Museum in an ARC Linkage Grant. The benefits in local or regional studies have been pretty low in a supposed historical atlas that is an excellent collection of essays, but without any geographic analysis and mapping sensibilities. [click] You have to ask what the decision-makers were thinking in terms of multidisciplinary learning. Or was it a political exercise for the institution? I am not going into the politics of ARC Linkage Grant, The Queensland Atlas of Religion, where community scholars ended up out of the process, left high and dry. I understand with my good relationship with Dr Geoff Ginn, it was a political decision ultimately with only half the ARC funding requested, provided by the Council.



A second argument is that postgraduates continue to produce thesis work in local and regional histories, so what is the problem? The problem lies in higher education policy. Schools, departments, and facilities operate too much in the bubble thinking, even though, across three decades, sandstone universities shifted in naming to the multidisciplinary approaches. Hence, departments of history amalgamated into Schools of Historical and Philosophy Inquiry. With the exception of the very few who work in the fields like intellectual history, historical sociology, philosophy of history, and educational history, historical thesis work of postgraduates generally fail to consider local and regional factors in sufficient multidisciplinary scoping. Units of the Schools still operate fairly independent. The rare exceptions in multidisciplinary and multi-geographic theses might exist, but we continue the public perception that universities are ivory towers with

overspecialisation.



There is the last line of defence offered in the apology of the curriculum and research direction. It is that in the last few years academics have created the solution in the emerging field of public history, and it is true, hopefully. University of Sydney led the way, and we now have the Australia and Aotearoa NZ Public History Network. And I am a grateful member. Nevertheless, the engagement in public history has to draw on the thinking in fields, such as intellectual history, historical sociology, philosophy of history, and educational history, and also reframe that work available as local and regional studies, to produce true public discussions, inside the communities and inclusive of their member's perspectives. This includes also the emergent and scholarly field of personal history, which had differences to biography and autobiography.





1995. Ph.D. Dad and Daughter: "A history career?...ahh...ahh"

As personal history, I offer this analytic narrative to explain what I am saying. In the cohort of history doctorate graduates at the University of Queensland during the mid-1990s, two persons found a working life in the education disciplines as ‘academics’. I have put an invert comma around ‘academic’ because, as we will see as the story progresses, we, the scholars, and the public, in the ‘crisis of the humanities’ and the ‘culture-history war’ (more inverted commas), do not understand what an academic is. Catherine Manathunga and I, as freshly minted academic historians immediately ended up teaching and researching education theories, and as such, it was a horrifying shock to look back on strategic blunders by the decision-makers in the UQ department of history during our own higher education. Dr Manathunga has had an extraordinary research and teaching career in Australia and New Zealand. Her own experience in the early-to-mid 1990s led to her expertise in postgraduate education.



1997.  
Wining in the Griffith University's  
OVC

Lived Higher Education Policy and Grand Generational Narratives at the University of Melbourne 2005-2008: An Educational Critique of Karl Mannheim and 'The Problem of Generations.'

Neville Buch, MPHIA (Qld)

"There is a narcissism within the professoriat that encourages—perhaps even rewards—members of the academic profession in the analysis of the so-called university experience. Histories of individual universities and colleges are legion. All self-respecting institutions that aspire to higher learning have their chronicles, and the provincialism of their efforts assures that they will never be read, except possibly by others afflicted by the same sort of myopia. Most of the scholars in this category are at some pains to emphasize the glories and achievements of the alma mater. Few of these scholars trouble themselves with looking beyond the boundaries of their own institutions."

James W. Hahn, *The University Ideal in History*, Dr. The Authority of the Rebellious Professor, Francis X. Hartigan (edited, 1989), *History and Humanities: Essays in Honour of Wilbur S. Shepperson*, University of Nevada Press, p. 285.

...the student of ideology is merely trying to think out a problem which people have stumbled upon in the course of their effort to orient themselves in the everyday life of society.

...History and practical life show a constant, if unconscious, search for more adequate educational methods in the different fields. Life is an incessant process of training and education.

Karl Mannheim (1936, reprint 2015), *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, Martino Publishing, pp. 153,158.

ABSTRACT

In January 2005 Professor Glyn Davis was appointed Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne and introduced the university's "Melbourne Curriculum" academic structure.



Dr Neville Buch, 2006-2008,  
Research Officer and  
Speechwriter,  
Office of Vice-Chancellor,  
University of Melbourne



2004.  
Renovation in the Melbourne  
University's OVC

I was a speechwriter and higher education researcher, working with four Vice-Chancellors: starting out with Roy Webb, the oldest Australian Vice-Chancellor, at Griffith University, the late Alan Gilbert the neo-liberal VC of the Melbourne Agenda, Kwong Lee Dow, one of the nation's leading educators, and Glyn Davis, one of the nation's political scientist and expert in higher education policy. From Kwong, I had learnt much in teacher education with his government commissioned report. I should also mention that I performed research and practiced policy in the faculties of Law and Education at the Queensland University of Technology. That personal history of higher education and research brought me to the realisation, when I returned to history as a consultant in the marketplace, that most academic historians do not understand the politics, policies, and curriculum changes in the universities, although academics in the fields of education do if they are focusing on these questions.

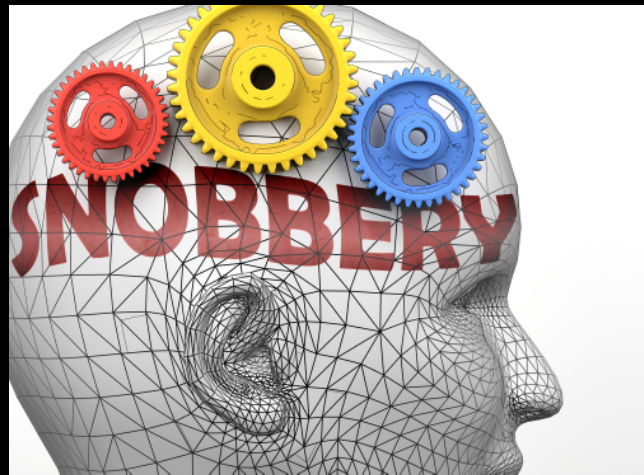


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The critical point with the problem of University's apology in the change in the curriculum direction, is that that such official disinterest in the wider matters of regional and local studies has been accompanied with an insular view of academic work. Universities claim that they do community engagement. I have enough evidence to state boldly, that University community engagement is a farce. To be sure, university history academics are ennobled to think that they are doing community engagement, but it is too often not the outcome.



What community engagement truly looks like is what members of the Professional Historians Associations (PHA) perform, out in the marketplace. Community engagement is not having a few community meetings, with university academics standing out in the front of the room, nor is it a process of contracting the favoured few professionals. Community engagement are the PHA projects, paid or pro-bono, which are performed in elevated levels of conversation and crediting community members for their local knowledge. Many university academics do not appreciate that there are members of local historical societies, in sufficient numbers, with doctorates, master's degrees or those without degrees who have such a prominent level of expert reading that they put university academics to shame.

This year Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon explain the origins of the modern research university in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century

This year Eric Hayot does the same for the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century

## Generations and Personalism

Recent texts of the history of the modern University are rediscovering the philosophical framings

Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon  
**Permanent Crisis**  
*The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*

**Humanist Reason**  
A History. An Argument. A Plan.  
Eric Hayot

What I outlined today comes from the readings in the philosophy of history, and of education. My frustration, in the messaging, is that all of these factors were known from the beginning of the modern research university, the University of Berlin in 1810. What I have been saying draws from many sources in the large corpus, but to mention two books published this year, Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon’s *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*, and Eric Hayot’s *Humanist Reason: A History. An Argument. A Plan.*

I used this slide at the Australian and New Zealand History of Education Society conference, a few weeks ago. Hopefully, it draw out the connections for you.



Image: OXFORD, ENGLAND - JUNE 19, 2013: Official proctors and Academics process along Cotte street to All Souls College of Oxford University at graduation day. Photo 178156593 / Town Gown © Arsty | Dreamstime.com

What the histories of the modern research University demonstrates is that, while magnificent work is done in areas such as communitarianism, the triangular relation between higher education, the State, and the nation's citizenry, the concept and practice of Gown and Town tradition, the institutional research and education falls short in several ways. Two little is considered of the:

- personas cast upon the interior of a bubble worldview thinking, in the internalist-externalist debates;
- roles of history and sociology once had in public education for urban development.



Those economic rationalist managers in the discipline too easily forget how history and history studies spirals back afresh. It was once a thriving field with the groundbreaking informed works of Lewis Mumford and Patrick Geddes. Now, the work is being done by PHA members like myself. Recently, I began pro bono work in efforts of two local organisations, CEED - Citizens for Ethical and Environmental Development and the Brisbane Southside Suburban Forum. The work involves critical engagement with the Brisbane City Council's Neighbourhood Plans. However, my research and publications in local and regional scoping is not limited to urban development. My work picks the dynamic in a host of conceptions in the narratives of Global and Local Culture, and the work involves applications from the fields of epistemology and ethics.





Relationship foundation words including communication, trust, commitment, understanding, compatibility and support on the home beams of a house.

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Finally, there are three better educational theories for local studies to claim its place. First, that there is only one multidisciplinary field, the Humanities, where the global and local are interlocked or organically whole. Secondly, there is no conflict between Student-Centred and Discipline Learning. Education is the pathway that locals are seeking out from material and intellectual poverty. And lastly, there is no necessity to create tensions between Compatibilist education and Conflict studies. To be philosophically compatibilist is not to deny that the real conflict exists and to recognise that some matters are irreconcilable. The point is those few things which are irreconcilable can be compatibility lived.



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