

# TIMES ARE A-CHANGING: NEW HORIZONS IN HISTORY

## – THE 2016 LESLEY MUIR ADDRESS Associate Professor Grace Karskens

It is a great honour to be invited to give the Lesley Muir address, to acknowledge Lesley's work in history and historical geography, and her lively commitment to public history and the history community via the RAHS and other historical societies. She truly was an inspiring model for a life in history.

The theme of this 2016 conference is apt – the times *are* changing in history. The most obvious, and most radical change of the past decade is the digital revolution: the astonishing fact that so much information is now available, searchable, countable, online and via databases. As historian Hamish Maxwell-Stewart wrote in *Australian Historical Studies* recently, 'big data' has huge implications for our understanding of past societies, for following life-courses of large groups of people, for tracking human activity across time and space, across centuries, across the globe. Hamish is one of the instigators of the *Founders and Survivors Project* which alone hold over 87,400 convict arrival records, and over 1.3 million linked records. And this is only one of a number of large digital projects, most of which are run co-operatively out of universities across the world.<sup>1</sup>

Another significant aspect of the digital revolution is of course that historical data has been democratised. Anyone can explore our newspapers via our wonderful Trove, and it's also a community project, because we can all contribute to its readability. Ancestry.com has digitised many colonial records, though you have to pay to use them and they are not so easily searchable. The Dictionary of Sydney is another excellent community digital project drawing together quality research on Sydney's history with maps and pictures, and making them accessible to everyone, from primary school children to scholarly researchers.

Yet the other big change in history seems to be at other end of the spectrum: the rise of what Frank Bongiorno calls *Australian histories of place*.<sup>2</sup> He was referring to books like Peter Read's *Belonging: Australian place and Aboriginal ownership*, James Boyce's *Van Diemen's Land*, Tom Griffiths' *Forests of Ash* and *Living with Fire*, my own work in *The Colony* and Mark McKenna's *Looking for Blackfellas' Point*. McKenna's more recent book *From the Edge: Australia's Lost Histories* falls into this category too.<sup>3</sup> These are studies characterised by deep explorations of the Australian historical imagination and intimate human experience. They draw on local history and heritage, they are interested in history-making and place-making, and they explore places with multiple, overlaid meanings for both Aboriginal people and settlers.

Big data and histories of place: gigantic and intimate; statistics and small things; global and local. Can these be reconciled? I want to argue that they can and must be. I have three main points here. In the first place, as philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour points out, the global *is* local. You can't actually point to 'global', only to bits of global networks or movements, linked by more abstract ideas, impulses and movements.<sup>4</sup> Eighteenth century global trade is actually ships and barrels and bales, ports and warehouses. The global network of convict transportation is actually thousands of individual people, and those people were not only shaped by forced exile, but by their own histories, cultures and experiences. This links nicely to my second point: big data and the internet make little data accessible. As family and local historians know, it is now *possible* to track individuals, to reconstruct life stories and movements and family formation, and in reasonable time. In the 1990s I manually searched the whole 1828 Census for people who lived in The Rocks. I used paper, a ruler and a pencil. It took weeks. Now I can find all those people in a matter of minutes on the database.<sup>5</sup> I'm sure many of you have stories like this.

This kind of research is not just about adding more detail, or limiting history to endless little stories. It is changing the kinds of history we can write. Even more important, and most excitingly, it can produce histories that powerfully challenge long-held stereotypes. My favourite example is Cath Bishop's book *Minding her own business*, which is about nineteenth century businesswomen in Sydney. The standard belief was that Sydney was built and used largely by men,



Jean Derrin, 'Country Cottage, Road to the Grose Valley, NSW', oil on board, c.1935, [Karskens Collection]

while women were confined to the home, domestic life and motherhood. Even feminist historians thought this was true... until historian Cath blew the whole model to smithereens in this book. By using Trove and similar sources, and patiently reconstructing women's lives, Cath rediscovered hundreds of business women in Sydney over the nineteenth century and showed that women were absolutely essential to the making and running of cities, as well as economic and social life.<sup>6</sup>

So the global is local, and small details can change big pictures. But there's another thing we have to keep in mind: the *type of data* in many of the Really Big Data projects. A lot of this material was created by authorities, by those in power – for example, convict records, court records and so on. So this is what the creators of that data, the authorities, *wanted you to know*. These records are inherently authoritarian. It is vital to keep this in mind when we explore the lost worlds of ordinary or exiled or dispossessed people – convicts, slaves, indentured servants, Aboriginal people. They were more than just what the data authorities collected about them. If we want to see the world from their perspective, the lived 'world from below', to understand them as human beings, we have to use an *ethnographic* approach to read the records 'against the grain'. We have to look out for the unintended hints and glimpses about what is really going on. We have to try to recreate the 'world from below', to explore what Alan Atkinson has called 'the hidden sinews of colonial society'.<sup>7</sup>

Hamish Maxwell Stewart writes that historians have to 'dare to think big' to take on Big Data, and he's right.<sup>8</sup> But sometimes I think you have to be not only brave but a bit mad to take on little data, the stuff you need for ethnographic history. It involves detailed explorations of the on-the-ground experience of real people in real places: their actions, interactions, their dress, stance, words, gestures and movements, their priorities and values. It means being curious about absolutely everything, re-imagining the situations of past peoples, so that we can begin to grasp the limits, choices and opportunities of their worlds.<sup>9</sup>

My earlier research, particularly for *The Colony*, also increasingly, insistently showed me that if we want to recreate past communities, we also have to think geographically and environmentally. Past peoples didn't float in some abstract dimensions somewhere, they lived in real places. In early Australia especially their lives were utterly entangled with elemental history: rivers, floodplains, mountains; stone, wood, earth; flood, drought and the years of plenty. Together, ethnographic and environmental history can turn the telescope around, so to speak, using gleaned 'little data' and recovered human landscapes and geographies to reveal astonishing new vistas: how the great processes of empire and colonisation, invasion and dispossession, actually unfolded on the ground.

---

### About the Author

Grace Karskens is Associate Professor of Australian History at the University of New South Wales. Her research areas include Australian colonial, cross-cultural, urban and environmental history and history, and she is active in promoting historical understandings and awareness to

wide audiences through writing, film, radio, museums, and online. She is a Trustee of Sydney Living Museums (the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales) and the online Dictionary of Sydney project. Her books include *Hobroyd: Social History of Western Sydney*, *Inside the Rocks: The Archaeology of a Neighbourhood* and the multi-award winning *The Rocks: Life in Early Sydney*. Her latest book *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney* won the 2010 Prime Minister's Literary Award for Non-Fiction and the US Urban History Association's prize for Best Book 2010. At the moment she is completing *People of the River*, a history of Aboriginal and settler peoples on the Hawkesbury-Nepean River from deep time to about 1830, to be published by Allen & Unwin.

---

### References

- <sup>1</sup> See Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, 'Big Data and Australian History', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 47, no 3, 359-64; and Founders and Survivors: Australian Life Courses in Historical Context 1803-1920, online at <http://foundersandsurvivors.org/>
- <sup>2</sup> Frank Bongiorno, 'From Local History to the History of Place: A Brief History of Local History in Australia', paper for the Victoria County History International Symposium, Institute of Historical Research, 2009, online at [www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/.../bongiorno\\_-\\_australian\\_local\\_history\\_paper.pdf](http://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/.../bongiorno_-_australian_local_history_paper.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> Peter Read, *Belonging: Australian place and Aboriginal ownership*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 2000; Tom Griffiths, *Forests of Ash: An Environmental History*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 2001; Mark McKenna, *Looking for Blackfella's Point: An Australian History of Place*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2002; James Boyce, *Van Diemen's Land*, Melbourne, Black Inc. Books, 2008; Grace Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2009; Mark McKenna, *From the Edge: Australia's Lost Histories*, Melbourne, Miegunyah Press, 2016.
- <sup>4</sup> See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993; and Bruno Latour, *Field Book to Follow the Exhibition Reset Modernity!*, Karlsruhe, ZKM Center of Art and Media, 2016, online at <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/681>
- <sup>5</sup> Malcolm Sainty and Keith A Johnson, *Census of New South Wales – November 1828*, Sydney, Library of Australian History, 1980 and published on CD-ROM 2001 and 2008.
- <sup>6</sup> Catherine Bishop, *Minding Her Own Business: Colonial businesswomen in Sydney*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2015.
- <sup>7</sup> Alan Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia Volume 2*, Melbourne Oxford University Press, 2004, p.13.
- <sup>8</sup> Maxwell-Stewart, 'Big Data and Australian History', p.363.
- <sup>9</sup> Excellent Australian ethnographic histories include Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, *Closing the Gates of Hell* and Tiffany Shellam, *Shaking Hands on the Fringe: Negotiating the Aboriginal World at King George's Sound*.