

---

# The 2023 Lesley Muir Address: Digitisation, Collaborating with Creatives and Reconciliation

Bruce Pennay

*I knew Lesley Muir via the ways our research paths crossed. Lesley, like me, battled with the Parkes Correspondence to fathom how the politics of railway building shaped localities – hers suburban, mine country towns. I acknowledge her as having been a fine historian keenly aware of the development of places – and a stalwart of this society.*

Delegates at this conference, considering ways ahead for local and community history, might find good starting points in Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton's reckonings of the history industry.<sup>1</sup> Within that book, Peter Hobbins points to the key challenges community historians face with digitisation, collaboration and reconciliation.

Meg Foster explains further that with digitisation and social media, public historians expand the ways they present their products creatively. Just as importantly, she points out that with digitisation comes accessibility and the 'democratisation' of sources, enabling everyone to develop their own understandings of the past.

With other contributors to that book, Hobbins and Foster, seem to me, to suggest a common quest – that of finding audiences. Accordingly, I begin with an outline of how historians and history groups – the history-makers in my local community, Albury-Wodonga – go about finding different audiences.

## Finding audiences

Albury and District Historical Society serves history-enthusiast members with the production of a well-produced newsletter and regular update of a well-managed website.<sup>2</sup> Since 2016, it has, with the Wodonga and District Historical Society, addressed the local print community with a picture story each week in the *Border Mail*.

Prompted by Covid disruptions, the society experimented with illustrated talks, realising that YouTube extends audience beyond the local and into at least two states. This year, emboldened by movements in creative history, it distributed widely three short films made in collaboration with Jacqui Schulz, an award-winning filmmaker, who presents argument visually with all the magic of movement and sound.<sup>3</sup> The documentaries marked commemorative moments – the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the

railway and the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the connection of the New South Wales and Victorian railway systems.<sup>4</sup>

Both history societies in Albury-Wodonga see local government as fellow history-makers as well as audiences to be carefully cultivated. Their members help with heritage reviews which set decisions on 'the special characteristics which contribute to our local identity'.<sup>5</sup>

## Enabling history-making

On both sides of the border, then, history-makers address a variety of audiences, but one audience segment – schools – has markedly shaped how we go about our work. In accord with the directions set in the national curriculum, we help prepare teaching/learning resources. So, for example, we have, with technical and schoolteacher collaborators, prepared a virtual tour of Bonegilla along with study guides which enable students to use Trove.<sup>6</sup> Over 3,500 people visited and engaged with this site in its first 12 months. With such endeavours we are following Meg Foster's suggestion to put emphasis on enabling history-making.

Again in 2017, we launched an ambitious campaign to get at least one local newspaper on Trove for as many years as possible. This enabled local people to explore more extensively their town, their place, and enabled Trove users from elsewhere to find out more about the border district. Already we have won over a million views of pages newly digitised in just one of the two newspapers involved.

At the same time, Wodonga Family History Society has enabled people everywhere to search Trove for family history. Their site has had nearly 1,000 views this year.

In a similar enabling way, Wodonga City Council has negotiated with the National Archives to ensure all the Bonegilla Registration Cards are now online and accessible.<sup>7</sup> This locally initiated digitisation of records enables local and online visitors, in both states, even nationally, to engage in their own history-making, be it a simple Facebook entry or a more ambitious family history. About 40 people each month access the Bonegilla Registration Cards.

456 *Polish. Baum. Hosp. 12.9.50*  
*Disch. " " 21.9.50* Serial No. ....

Surname..... **ADAMOWICZ**

Christian Names..... **Anna**

Nationality..... **Pol.** Age..... **10/12/46** Sex..... **F**

Date of Arrival..... **18 JUN 1950** Marital State..... **S** Religion..... **R.C.**

Ex Ship..... **Nelly IV** Description

Date of Departure..... **21/9/50** Height.....

Destination..... **"Catherine Booth"** Weight.....

**Salvation Army** Hair.....

**Home, Sackville St.** Eyes.....

**Kew, Vic.** Complexion.....

Trade..... **T.L. 2244** Scars.....

Standard of Education..... General.....

Address of Next of Kin  
 (If known)  
**father Jozef**

*Adamowicz Anna*

*9.1.51: Returned Bonegilla (details on mother's card)*

**17/1/51: DEPT OF IMMIGRATION HOLDING CENTRE URANQUINTY**

**NSW TL 2728**

National Archives of Australia wco. 2088 NAA: A2571, 2/5



NAA A2571, Bonegilla record card, Adamowicz, Anna.

I look forward to hearing about how other communities, have been involved in collaborations with local creatives and in enabling activities. But now let me unfold a place story that raises questions about reconciliation, the third of the challenges identified by Peter Hobbins.

## Creating Albury

Many of you bravely ventured beyond the 'limits of location' to come to this conference. After Yass, you stepped outside the safety of the nineteen counties. You stepped, before gold and separation, along the way to the Port Phillip District of New South Wales.

Unlike Governor Darling, Governor Bourke saw no need to contain the colony and encouraged free immigration. It was left to Governor Gipps to manage the expansion north and south as the 1830s merged into the 1840s. That expansion brought 'collisions' between settlers and Aboriginal people. Gipps was instructed by an anxious British government that he should ensure the Aboriginal people had the rights of British subjects.

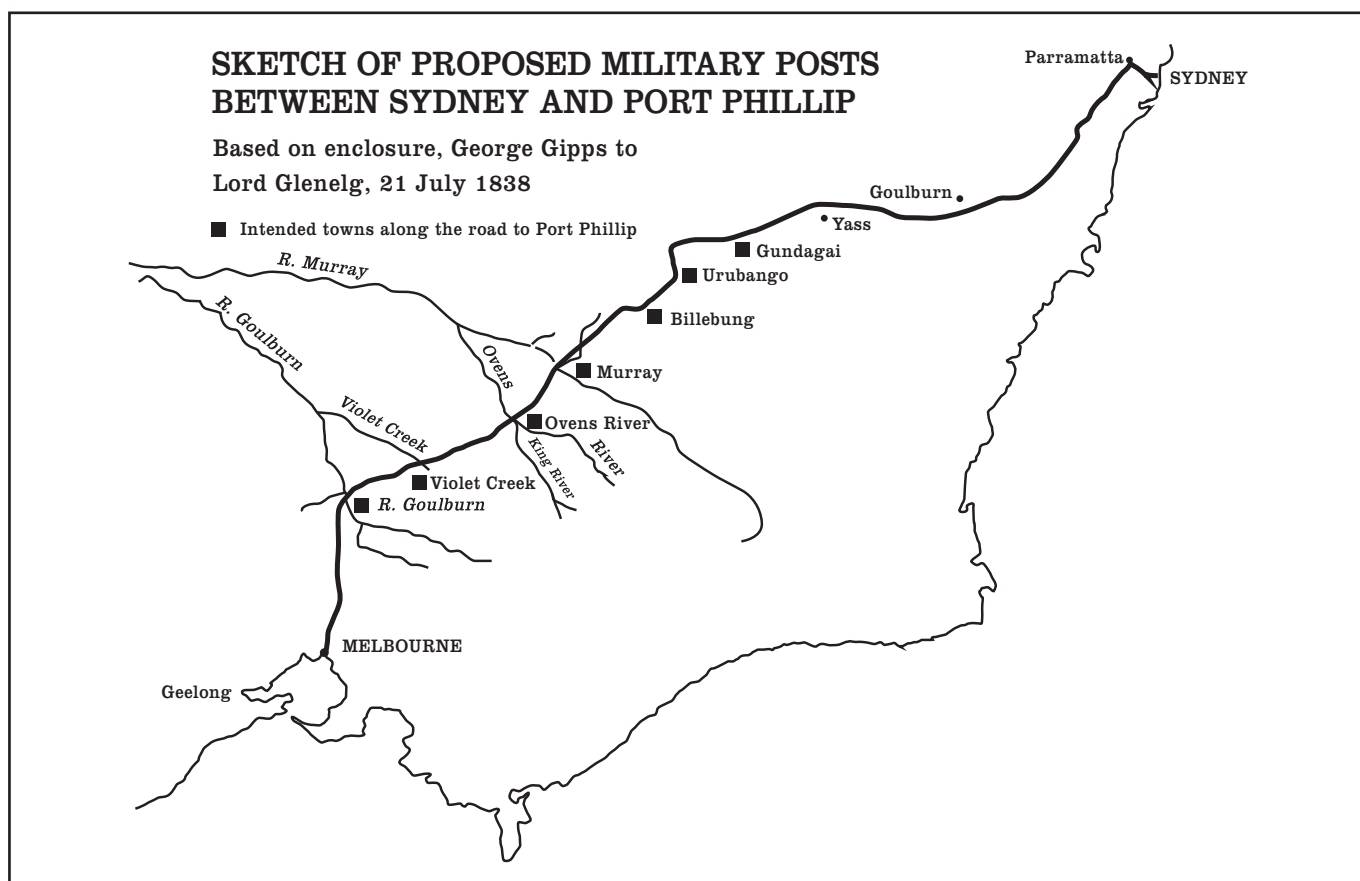
During 1838, Gipps was required to act on reports of massacres at Waterloo Creek and Myall Creek in the north of the state. Between those two massacres (in April 1838) Aboriginal people killed seven overlanders to the south at Broken River, near modern-day Benalla. The incident stalled settler movements south of the Murray River.

As a result, Gipps decided to establish several mounted police posts along the route from Yass to Port Phillip to provide 'for the protection of Colonists frequenting the route'. Further, Gipps endorsed a proposal to establish towns adjacent to the police posts to support them. The new towns would become 'regular halting places' with 'post houses' and 'houses of public entertainment'. These 'places of protection' would be at the principal crossing places, for example at the Murray, Broken and Goulburn Rivers.<sup>8</sup>

A survey in August 1838 located a ford and fixed the sites for a police hut and a town at a Murray River Crossing Place. The police hut was built in 17 days in October 1838. The survey was approved, and the newly created town adjacent to the hut was called 'Albury' in early 1839.

The police hut, its huge police paddock, and the crossing became the prime elements in what Mary Louise Pratt describes as 'a contact zone'. A place where people geographically and historically separated, encountered each other, and where they began to establish ongoing relations. There, settlers and Aboriginal people went about finding ways to live together and separately. Some started to form an integrated economy.<sup>9</sup>

Albury, then, was founded as part of a military strategy to take possession of the land by securing a principal line of communication. The establishment of an



*Sketch of proposed route and towns, 21 July 1838, Historical Records of Victoria, vol. 2A, p. 352.*

official Murray River Crossing Place changed the place forever. It had profound consequences for Aboriginal communities and their way of life.

This is a rich, complicated, and unfolding place story, sourced from government and settler records, and the records of visitors. The story is complicated further in that the written records must be combed carefully to glimpse what might have been Aboriginal experiences of colonisation. Nevertheless, archaeologists, undertaking a survey of the nearby sewer line, have suggested the police hut site could be significant to the State by helping to explain the development of law enforcement; the formation of the town; interchanges between groups of Aboriginal people and settlers; and Aboriginal occupation of the area where the hut is located.<sup>10</sup>

As a place story it is complicated even further in that there are no visible above ground remnants of the police hut in bushlands along the northern shore of the Murray River west of the Albury Swim Centre. The hut site is firmly located in a parish map. But there are no above ground remains. The site is unmarked.

That complication of invisibility deserves special attention as it alerts local historical societies to changing heritage protocols.

The under-representation of contact/post-contact Aboriginal heritage on heritage lists has fired new approaches to identifying places and determining heritage value. Some heritage scholars have queried what they call 'thingification', exaggerating the value of material representation. They ask for more attention to be given to social value. Some have called for 'a narrative approach' and ask for veneration not only of buildings, ruins or objects, but of 'cultural landscapes'.<sup>11</sup>

Analysts of new national listings of Aboriginal heritage have observed this pull of 'story before site'.<sup>12</sup> They note that the Commonwealth has provided leadership with its listing in 2008 of the 23-hectare Myall Creek Massacre and Memorial Site, which has no strong layers of material evidence.

In 2020, New South Wales was not impeded by the lack of material evidence when listing the Waterloo Creek Massacre, or, in 2022, when listing the Appin Massacre Cultural Landscape Site. In June this year, Heritage NSW clarified its approach to listing places and objects as 'items', still strong on location, but admitting landscapes and precincts to capture scattered aspects of a story.

Further, the Appin Massacre Cultural Landscape was co-nominated for listing by the Heritage Council of



New South Wales and the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee, for its shared Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural heritage values.<sup>13</sup> Co-nomination underscores the importance of sharing a place as a heritage item. Co-nominations are not simply prepared after consultation with Aboriginal people but involve Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together to decide on shared heritage values – that is, shared statements of significance and shared principal stories associated with the place. In heritage, as in Indigenous education and health, in museums and in park management, collaboration entails co-design, shared ownership.

In partnership with Yalmambirra, a local Aboriginal scholar, we have shared stories of the police hut with Albury City Council's Dyiraamalang Reconciliation Working Group. That group is considering co-nominating the site of the police hut as a heritage item.

Laurajane Smith reminds us that heritage site visitors have different 'entrance narratives'.<sup>14</sup>

The Dyiraamalang Working Group will decide the principal meanings the police hut site holds for them. They may see the listing of the police hut site as expanding opportunities for Aboriginal voices to be heard on matters such as frontier violence, cross-cultural engagement or resilience. They may prefer to tell how the site and, indeed the invasion, was a small footnote in a much longer and deeper history. Accordingly, they may prefer to focus on how the contemporary Aboriginal community might explore, practise and promote the traditional life and customs of the Wiradjuri and other First Nations Peoples.

However, there seems to be a community readiness, even an urgency, for stories of colonisation, dispossession, resistance and adaptation. Consequently, we suggest police hut stories may help local schools investigating the 'Aboriginal People's Experiences of Colonisation'.

Albury City has reworked the original crossing place near the swimming pool as a magnificent River Experience board walk. The story of the Aboriginal Crossing Place at Bungambrawatha will be partly unfolded in a public art piece by Marley Dawson, a local creative.<sup>15</sup> We have hopes that signage off the board walk will point, perhaps discordantly, to the police hut and an official White Settlement Crossing Place that founded the town of Albury. To supplement such signage, we expect historians to tell contextualised stories, hopefully in collaboration with other creatives, to explain why the hitherto invisible police hut site might become a public memory place.

## About the Author

Bruce Pennay OAM is an Adjunct Associate Professor at Charles Sturt University. His research interests focus on the cultural heritage of the New South Wales-Victorian border region and post-war immigration history and heritage. Shortly after he retired, he won several awards, including a life membership of the History Council of New South Wales and a Medal of the Order of Australia. In 2019, he received an honorary doctorate from Charles Sturt University. In 2023, he was made an honorary life member of the Albury and District Historical Society. Bruce has been a member of local historical societies for many years.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton (eds.), *The Australian History Industry*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2022.
- <sup>2</sup> <<https://alburyhistory.org.au/>>.
- <sup>3</sup> Keira Lindsey et al., "Creative histories" in the Australian context', *History Australia*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2022.
- <sup>4</sup> For example, <<https://youtu.be/WptOwUQ3KvU>>.
- <sup>5</sup> Albury City Council, *Local Strategic Planning Statement*, 2020.
- <sup>6</sup> <<https://about.csu.edu.au/community/initiatives/bonegilla>>.
- <sup>7</sup> <[https://issuu.com/wodongacouncil/docs/re-peopling\\_bonegilla\\_online\\_print](https://issuu.com/wodongacouncil/docs/re-peopling_bonegilla_online_print)>.
- <sup>8</sup> Michael Cannon, *Historical Records of Victoria*, vols. 2A and 2B, Victorian Government Printing Office, 1982.
- <sup>9</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, 1992, pp. 6–7.
- <sup>10</sup> Rebecca Morris, *Main Sewage Pump Station and Rising Main Investigations*, Bios Pty Ltd, 2017.
- <sup>11</sup> Nigel Walter, 'From values to narrative: A new foundation for the conservation of historic buildings', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 20, no. 6, 2014; Tracy Ireland, Steve Brown and John Schofield, 'Situating (in)significance', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 26, no. 9, 2020.
- <sup>12</sup> Celmara Pocock, David Collett and Linda Baulch, 'Assessing stories before site: Identifying the tangible from the intangible', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 21, no. 10, 2015.
- <sup>13</sup> <<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/research-and-publications/publications-search/assessing-heritage-significance>>.
- <sup>14</sup> Laurajane Smith, *Emotional Heritage: Visitor Engagements at Museums and Heritage Sites*, Routledge, 2021.
- <sup>15</sup> <<https://www.alburycity.nsw.gov.au/leisure/arts-and-culture/public-art/bungambrawatha>>.