

LOCAL HISTORY: 'TYRANNY OF DISTANCE'

Narratives within rural local history are essential democratisations of the past, rather than parochial distraction from the analytical discourse of the academe.

Discuss, with reference to local historian Foreman Crawford and the Great Strike of 1917.

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Synopsis

Local history shapes community identity and spirit. Alstonville is a small town in Northern NSW. In its centre is Crawford House, a local history museum and former home of the Crawford Family. Three brothers (William, Norman and Foreman) all kept diaries for most of their lives and, in 1983, Foreman Crawford published a local history of Alstonville, *Duck Creek Mountain Now Alstonville*. The unique perspectives within this work, alongside the voices of many other local historians, are threatened by marginalisation imposed by the academe.

Many Australians are unaware of the extraordinary social conflict, known as the Great Strike of 1917, that has shaped modern industrial relations. The official national account of the strike can be found within Ernest Scott's (highly empirical) volume of the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*. In 2017, the Great Strike celebrated its centenary and experienced a momentary flux of academic interest. Contemporary historians Robert Bollard, Lucy Taksa and Dan Coward have explored issues such as the relationship between industrial ferment and the war. Yet, the rural voices of strike-breaker volunteers continue to be silenced.

This essay, inspired by a photograph of Alstonville volunteers as strike-breakers in Sydney (Appendix One), explores the potential for a local revisionism of the past. Surpassing tyrannies of distance, Crawford's local history encourages a symbiosis between academics and local historians (particularly from rural areas). Furthermore, local history is a viable solution to the epistemic destabilisation caused by increasing societal engagement with 'historical drama'.

During this project, I have discovered that local historians thrive in supportive communities and the construction of this essay has been nurtured by the generosity of my community to share their history. Every family has a story. Collectively, these stories shape our local lifestyles and, our national character.

Essay

In Memory of Dorothy Crawford (1919-2018)

When Australians began to sense that they were plunged into a new environment, the spectacles they had carried out from Britain were obsolete. They needed spectacles that would correct short-sightedness. They had to see the environment they were in as clearly as the environment they had left across the world.

Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance*

Academic condescension of rural local history¹ threatens the foundations of our Australian historical

narrative. Local history is capable of providing more than parochial and antiquarian services to national historians. It unravels the truths and experiences of tangible individuals, enriching our narrative with intimate, anthropological understandings of our past. Local historians are curators of community-sacred knowledge² and yet, most are not trained in the discipline and rigour of the academe. Local historians are often incapable of comprehensive analysis of sources from a national perspective.³ A local approach to history (without interpretation or context) frustrates the academic, driving them to hide behind the battlements of footnotes and the peer-review process.⁴

The uncomfortable chasm between the paradigms of local historians and academics is exposed within the historiography of the most dramatic industrial relations confrontation in Australian history – the Great Strike⁵ of 1917. The strike is embedded within the 'hidden history of Australia in WW1'. Robert Bollard writes:

As we peel off the surface layers of the onion, there are yet more layers of forgetting. The final layer, one that has eluded not just popular understanding but many academic accounts, is an ignorance of the full nature and extent of the radicalisation of the Australian working class between 1916 and 1919.⁶

The industrial conflagration, involving around 100,000 workers, highlighted an ideological feud between socialist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and rising Taylorism⁷ within industrial management principles. The reaction of blue-collar workers to the strike reflected the camaraderie of soldiers⁸ and extreme unionist action placed immense pressure on the government. In response to public appeal, an upheaval of rural volunteers travelled from across the nation to sustain the home front in Sydney.⁹

Ernest Scott's *Australia During the War* is the official national account of the strike.¹⁰ Whilst impressive, the work suffers from a 'remoteness from the lives of ordinary people'¹¹ (potentially due to the initial censorship¹² of primary sources). In particular, the voices of the rural, strike-breaker volunteers are silenced. Local historian Foreman Crawford, an Alstonville dairy farmer, wanted his voice heard:

I feel that I have a wealth of information that will be lost forever if it is not written down and preserved. Moreover, I feel a moral obligation to do so.¹³

His book, *Duck Creek Mountain Now Alstonville*, is an assortment of historical snapshots concerning the development of regional Australia and includes details of his experience as a strike-breaker. He notes:

The Government would not allow this militant

section [strikers] to take charge and rule the country. They called for volunteers to keep the wheels of industry moving and thousands of men from all walks of life rallied to the government's aid.¹⁴

Crawford's experiences are intriguing and highlight two key flaws within present historiography; a lack of detail and a lack of balance. As a local historian, Crawford is positioned to augment and democratise the national narrative. However, one must ask: how can a *history* not adhere to a basic chronology or skeleton of source referencing? If the researcher does not attempt to reconstruct a timeline of the past, how can they exist within the parameters of 'an historian'? For the academic, it may be too easy to obey these constraints of conventional historical practice and classify Crawford as a primary source (with limited value to national archives).¹⁵ But, with this conclusion, the local historian is not content.

The chaotic and infinitely fractured nature of the past can distort historical truth. The 'tyranny of distance', a term popularised by Geoffrey Blainey¹⁶, describes how national history has shaped a detached perception of historical events, such as the Great Strike. Regarding local history, the tyranny of distance can be utilised in two epistemic frameworks. Firstly, a geographic distance exists between the humble laneways of Alstonville and the metropolis of Sydney. Crawford's rural, but educated, perspective brings new insights into historical interpretations of the strike, yet it also narrows his understanding of causality. Secondly, Crawford's colloquial narrative structure, common to most local histories, is a stark contrast to the analytical discourse of contemporary academic methodology – although national stories and academic studies of a locality occasionally develop. Whilst narrative structure improves the accessibility of history, a microscopic examination of the past may generate a problematic distance between historical construction and objective truth. For the credibility of local historians (such as Crawford) to be acknowledged by the academe, they must cross contextual and structural historiographical terrains. If they fail and local history is not exonerated from the shackles of condescension, contemporary historical practice will suffer a 'tyranny of distance' with its relationship to the past. If they succeed, future societies will have the capacity to ground themselves in a rich and accessible historical narrative.

People understand the landscape they inhabit in terms of its place in a grand narrative of time.¹⁷

As long as the community continues to be a vital part of the human experience, each new generation will need to re-establish their meaning through nearby history.¹⁸

For the modern Alstonville resident, *Duck Creek*

Mountain Now Alstonville has timeless value. Nostalgia evoked towards well-known localities represents a deep chorographic connection between local historians and their milieu. For a variety of reasons, academic historians are generally incapable of achieving this connection, yet they continue to treat local history as 'dead weight on shelves'.¹⁹ Crawford's work will have merit away from his local area if the perspective is unique and provides opportunity for revisionism. For example, class struggle that characterised the strike deserves synonymity with the democratisation of history. Marxist historiographical upheaval was prevalent in the early twentieth century²⁰ but has not influenced strike historiography to the same extent. Martin Wright suggests:

People's history must exist in two senses: it is not enough for it to be merely a history *of* the people; it must also be created and owned *by* the people.²¹

Whilst local history has origins amongst wealthy Tudors²², aristocracy is no longer a prerequisite for a career in local history and the expanse of Australian historical societies evidences a transition of local history into a vocation owned by the people.

In his recent book *Kin*, Nick Brodie uses his own family tree to explore Australian history.

Historians are cursed to inhabit worlds in which they do not rightly belong. Spectral observers, they are bound by the real tyrant of distance: time. ... yet paradoxically I have ended up with what is a national history drawn wholly from the diversity within my own family tree.²³

This mirrors the historiographical journey of Crawford who discovered that his 'own family story was so interwoven with the story of Duck Creek Mountain settlement' that it was effectively a local history in itself.²⁴ Even so, these fabrics are ultimately torn apart when Crawford travels to Sydney. To assuage his tyranny of distance, Brodie consults academic historians to challenge 'mythologised' components of the Australian narrative.²⁵ In contrast, Crawford's value is his capacity to allow new voices and perspectives, particularly from rural Australia, to enter the historical narrative.

Few of us were familiar with the city and suburbs... The stableman told [the strike-breakers] to 'let the horses have their heads, they'll bring you back from anywhere'.²⁶

Alongside local historian Trevor Edmunds' 'The Strike that Never Ended'²⁷, Crawford's work explores the shadows cast (consciously or unconsciously) by Scott's national reconstruction. Rural history is significant within historical fields dominated by urban academics and if it ascertains itself as a substantial force, it can establish a

democracy with urban history.

This synergy also remedies imperfections within local histories. Crawford is convinced, from his conservative local viewpoint, that the violent, communist-inspired IWW ignited the strike²⁸ stating that ‘many unionists were unaware that they were being used by communists to further their aims’.²⁹ This predisposition is somewhat supported by Scott. However, due to his urban empirical context,³⁰ Scott claims:

The IWW was not a natural growth from Australian trade unionism; it was a foreign invention whose promoters were at variance with unionism of the orthodox type... The leaders of unionism were under no delusions as to the destructive nature of the IWW.³¹

Scott emphasises the role of the Australian Worker’s Union and the Federal Arbitration Court in fostering an environment for the strike. This is evidenced through footnoted Commonwealth statistics and industrial reports. Unlike Scott, Crawford’s work does not refer to the Russian Revolution as a catalyst for industrial ferment (likely since regional newspapers predominantly focus on local matters³²). It is documented, however, that a National party politician travelled to Alstonville in 1917 – introducing the IWW as a plot to compromise the home front.³³ This attitude may inhibit Crawford’s ability to objectively identify the cause of the strike and the extent of radicalisation, in comparison to Scott. Local historians have hardly begun to explore the problems associated with an over-reliance on primary sources.³⁴ However, with instruction from the academe, local historians have the potential to bridge geographic distance and increase our collective understanding of the attitudes within past communities.

Indigenous legends, the contemporary resurgence of historical drama and the ideology of post-modernist Hayden White³⁵ all evidence an innate yearning to understand the past through narrative. The journeys of people are intriguing³⁶ and Crawford utilises narrative structure to invigorate our scarce understanding of strike-breaker livelihood. He mentions soldiers with fixed bayonets³⁷ and explains how:

Some volunteers carried revolvers and one carrier, who was attacked with an iron bar by one of a group of strikers, drew his revolver and the assailant was shot and died.³⁸

These recollections are important because they support Bollard’s hypothesis of violence and radicalisation – absent from Scott’s national account (and Coward’s analysis³⁹) – that pervaded the strike. In an interview for the Bicentennial Oral History Project, Crawford further comments on hazardous working conditions for volunteers (‘those who remained at work took their lives

in their hands’) and the relentless protests by strikers.⁴⁰

When they appear within academic history, the experiences of rural volunteers are often obscured by their characterisation.⁴¹ Crawford’s narrative continues to increase our emotive understanding of strike-breakers through descriptions of the journey to Sydney in railway carriages (‘our feet were like ice’),⁴² camping at the Sydney Cricket Ground amidst a ‘beer conspiracy’,⁴³ learning skills required to load the ‘Boonah’ vessel with supplies for the war⁴⁴ and the disputed luck of those chosen to camp with elephants at Taronga Park.⁴⁵ By referring to himself as a ‘Crusader’⁴⁶, fellow strike-breaker Norman Crawford insinuates the Protestant motives of some volunteers.⁴⁷ These are vibrant and unique accounts, enriching the historical narrative, that would likely have been forgotten without a local historian.

A narrative approach to history is unusual in the academe. Gordon Wood asserts:

Most academic historians, especially at the beginning of their careers, have chosen to write what might be described as analytical history, specialised and often narrowly focussed monographs.⁴⁸

The analytical discourse between Bollard⁴⁹, Taksa⁵⁰ and Coward⁵¹ examines the causality of the strike. However, the ‘astounding rupture in industrial life has fallen out of society’s collective memory’.⁵² Academic historians are continually frustrated by a lack of societal engagement with history and subsequent epistemic destabilisation. Whilst wider society has enjoyed the emergence of ‘historical drama’, it has come at the price of historical accuracy.⁵³ These anachronisms, as Blainey suggests, characterise a new historiographical environment. Local history has the potential to exceed antiquarian stigmatism if it can embrace narrative history as an alternative means of communicating past events.

Admittedly, Crawford’s methodology (stark juxtaposition to colourless, scientific history⁵⁴) is flawed. His approach to history is to ‘let it all in’.⁵⁵ Brian Edwards is critical of such practice:

Published without any further explanation or thought, these notes are impoverishing local history, reducing it to a mere catalogue of parochial trivia.⁵⁶

Edwards also suggests an antidote. What if we could ‘foster ground for spatial awareness’?⁵⁷ Synthesise individual interest into wider regional identity? With academic assistance, local historians could develop into ‘qualified’ narrators. Nurturing local history, national historians will discover a resurrecting symbiosis that engages communities with their past.

There is a large amount of data flowing into the

consciousness of Australian history. Crawford's parochial interpretation of the strike cannot solely be relied upon in the construction of national narrative. Furthermore, when researching a national event, the academic historian cannot be expected to understand the entirety of Australian local history. To resolve this historiographical paradox, the heterogeneity of local historians must consolidate their tangible experience of the past within broader research. It is the obligation of local historians to engage with the national dialogue in order to supplement their writings on local happenings. To visualise this process, the national historian can picture their historical explorations as a walk down the Main Street of Alstonville. Whilst it would be impossible to examine every stone, the role of the local historian is to make sure the national historian does not miss any 'revisionist gems' in the gravel. H.P.R. Finberg further illuminates this concept:

We may picture the local community, the national state and the supra-national society as a series of concentric circles. Each requires to be studied with constant reference to the one outside it; but the inner rings are not the less perfect circles for being wholly surrounded and enclosed by the outer.⁵⁸

This nuanced collaboration between academic national and amateur local historians has been visualised within the Dictionary of Sydney project.⁵⁹ With regard to the Great Strike, the dictionary combines national analysis

with personal accounts of strikers.⁶⁰ By removing prejudices towards local historians, future co-operation can be encouraged and people from all walks of life will be given a voice in the historical discourse.

History belongs to us all and hence, is unequivocally judged by contemporary social conduct.⁶¹ Despite revisionism of the Great Strike of 1917 being hindered by the academic marginalisation of local historians, the fire has not gone out. By giving thought to the continuity of his context, Crawford has not only evidenced a radicalisation of the working class but also pioneered the democratisation of strike historiography. Amidst contemporary reformation of societal historical engagement, local historians have remained a talisman of historical truth through connection to geographical locality and community voice. Academic history, although multifaceted, is futile without an audience and this tyranny of distance threatens our relationship with the past. Local history, nestled beneath the wings of national history and retaining a grounding in empirical evidence gathering, has the capacity to bridge the schism with an intriguing perspective and narrative approach. Overcoming his tyrannies of distance, Crawford's legacy in Alstonville is reflective of that which local historians impart in all corners of Australia. A small voice in the expanse of our storied existence, Crawford challenges local historians to rally not just for the democratisation of the past, but for those that study it.



Appendix One

Primary Source (bottom of p.46): Group of Alstonville volunteers, including the Crawford brothers, at the Sydney Cricket Ground during the Great Strike of 1917 (photograph stored in the Alstonville Plateau Historical Society archives).

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theory in history.

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