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ARTICLES (PEER REVIEWED)

Public History in Australia

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Since 2017 I have sat on the Steering Committee of the International Federation of Public History (IFPH).¹ This organisation was first established as an internal committee of the Comité International des Sciences Historiques-International Committee for the Historical Sciences to promote the development of a worldwide network of scholars and practitioners working in the field, sharing details of public history courses, experts and events.² The IFPH now includes members from across the world working on and in public history, in and outside academia, the Galleries Libraries and Museums (GLAM) sector and heritage. Over the past few years increasing numbers of national associations have been established in Italy and Brazil, and regional networks include South Asia and elsewhere.

Recently the IFPH discussed the affiliation of these varied groups and their relationship with the international network. It was at that moment that it occurred to me that Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand did not have a network of public historians encompassing the region. I could not quite believe it took me until late 2020 to realise this. I have been working as a public historian in Sydney, Australia, for over a decade! Perhaps COVID-19 had forced me to concentrate on home a little more than I was used to. Having trained as a historian in Britain and moved to Australia in 2008, I have long enjoyed my transnational links and international travel. With dual British and Australian nationality, I have spent most of my career trying to break down intellectual, epistemological and other divisions between nations. But it seemed to me, following the impact of COVID-19 in 2020, that a personal and professional focus on the local for the next few years might be wise.

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Globally public history has waxed and waned in popularity and strength over the past thirty years. Emerging in Australia in the late 1970s as this sub-discipline took hold in the US, history graduates took up jobs as public historians, becoming heritage workers, curators, museum professionals, screenwriters, television and radio documentary producers and creative non-fiction writers as academic opportunities diminished.³ Public (applied) history was taught at Masters level for many years at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), established by Ann Curthoys and Paula Hamilton in 1988 and joined later by Heather Goodhall and Paul Ashton, and at Monash in Melbourne, led by Graeme Davison from the same year.⁴ The term ‘applied history’ fell out of favour in the 1980s due to its association with public policy and, as Paul Ashton suggests, its ‘blue-collar connotations’ at the time.⁵ Other public history programs were established at Murdoch in 1991, Queensland in 1994, Sydney in 1994 and Adelaide in 1996.⁶ It has been discontinued at most of these institutions but survives, for the time being, at the University of New England, University of New South Wales and Deakin University. Public history is also taught as part of courses on heritage, museums and digital history, for example at the University of Western Australia, the University of Sydney, Flinders University in South Australia, the University of Queensland and the Australian National University in Canberra. The University of Technology Sydney established its Australian Centre for Public History in 1999 but its future remains uncertain, like many similar centers and institutes, in the current turbulent Australian tertiary context.

Outside of universities, in the early 1980s professional historians’ associations were established across Australia, starting with the South Australian association in 1981. A professional association formed under the umbrella of the History Institute of Victoria and the Professional Historians Association of NSW Inc followed in 1985, Queensland in 1990, Western Australia in 1989 and Tasmania in 1992.⁷ The organization of public historians in academic departments and professional organizations suggested a lively growth in and outside of academic contexts. However, the relationship between the two groups of historians remained fractious.

In 2013 one of Australia’s most prominent and prolific public historians, Paul Ashton – originally based at UTS and now holding adjunct positions at UTS, the University of Canberra and Macquarie University, suggested there were 300 freelancers practicing history in Australia.⁸ This figure is now just over 350.⁹ In 2021 he calculated that there were about 150 academic historians working across New South Wales and 100 members involved with the Professional Historians Association in NSW.¹⁰ In Australia there were about 500 historians employed as academics (down from around 1750 in the mid 1970s). The recent cut in government funding for Australian universities and retrenchments and redundancies across all universities may have had an impact on these figures.¹¹ Freelance work in history is concentrated in New South Wales and Victoria, Australia’s most populous states. These professionals are engaged in the private, public and community sectors.¹² The number of freelance professional historians will probably increase in the future, and it would be wonderful to see other figures calculated beyond Australia – I encourage public historians in these areas to collect this data. Despite many attempts to bring these groups together, academics, freelancers – both professionals – and other types of historians continue largely to work in silos and communicate infrequently. There is no doubt that divisions, rivalries and hostilities continue to exist among these different groups as numerous commentators and writers suggest.¹³

I became much more aware of the field of public history and its varied practitioners and projects when I moved to Australia in 2008. For over twenty years I have worked as a social and cultural historian of the family in Britain and Australia. After training in Britain, I now teach modern history and public history at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. Trained as a social historian, I have always been drawn to researching ‘ordinary’ people and places in the past and relating their stories in ways that appeal to diverse audiences. I have become increasingly committed to incorporating non-academic historians and enthusiasts into the process of my research, co-creating historical knowledge with diverse constituencies and organisations to produce a range of outputs.

As a public historian, I try to make clear the nexus between my teaching, research and community engagement activities. As I suggested above, I only began to think of myself as a public historian after I moved to Australia from London in 2008. But while I was based in Britain – where the sub-field was emerging and naming itself¹⁴ – my identity as a public historian was taking shape. The organisation ‘History and Policy’ was set up in 2002 and was based at the Centre for Contemporary British History at the Institute of Historical Research, London. At that time, I was working as a research fellow under the leadership of Professor Pat Thane on a project entitled ‘Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England.’ I understand now how much I learned then about the benefits of collaborating with cultural institutions, charities and non-government organisations (NGOs) on academic research projects, and the pleasure involved in engaging with different audiences, seeking to use historical research to make an impact on policy makers and the general public.¹⁵ This Economic and Social Research Council funded project had diverse outputs, including an academic book on the history of lone motherhood in twentieth-century Britain, journal articles, an exhibition at The Women’s Library and a BBC television documentary.¹⁶ I learned to cherish teamwork with partners outside an academic context and the benefits of engaging with different producers of history who were hoping to find new and expanded audiences for our work.

After arriving as a research fellow in Australia in 2008 I became involved with the History Council of New South Wales in 2009, serving as President from 2017 until 2019. This is a peak body representing historical organisations and people interested in history across New South Wales.¹⁷ My engagement with the History Council led me to become friends and acquaintances of many freelance public historians working throughout the state and nationally. This was how I became better informed of their work and contribution to historical knowledge and public history practice in Australia. This new-found knowledge encouraged me to join the Professional Historians Association of NSW. My increasing awareness of their work and the obvious divisions between historians who had followed diverse career paths and training was one of the main drivers for the establishment of the Centre for Applied History at Macquarie University, which I direct, in 2016.¹⁸ I hoped to create a hub where these different historians would come together and communicate better, to work on public history projects in partnership.

As most of us know, the term public history was first used in 1970s’ America and came into common use in Australia in the 1980s. It did not take off in Britain until the 2000s. That said, as Australian historian Graeme Davison reminds us, public history ‘is a new name for the oldest history of all’.¹⁹ For centuries public history was practiced as local, family and community history and flourished outside academic contexts following the formalization, professionalization and masculinization of the discipline within universities in the late nineteenth century.²⁰ During the 1970s following the growth of social history, public history facilitated the kinds of political and community engagement that had been key to many international social history projects, academic and otherwise. This was especially the case in Britain where ‘people’s history’ thrived. Applied history dominated the US scene, while Australia practiced and produced a mixture of both. One of the reasons why I have come to understand my scholarly work as public history in recent years is due to its political purpose. I, like others, use my work to critique the elitist, professionalized, hierarchical and exclusionary discipline that some historians work hard to protect. I want to encourage others to collaborate with audiences and researchers outside of academia, working with history in everyday life.

In Australia many public historians remain inspired by the early work of the British History Workshop Movement and are committed to engaging everyone in their passion for history. This was why, like many other public historians intent on making our discipline more democratic and inclusive, I became set on a path of collaborative endeavor as I planned my history research projects from the late 2000s. These projects and passions explain why I became involved in the #HistoriansCollaborate network and seminar program, based in the UK, in 2019. This aims to be a ‘collaborative network for family, local, social and community

histories'. We want to encourage a network of scholars working in the Arts across the UK and Australia on community collaborative projects, especially those working with family, local and community historians.

Each one of us seeks to challenge the hierarchies and boundaries that exist between family historians, academic and other historians in the Galleries Libraries and Museum sector and elsewhere that prevent meaningful dialogue between us. We have established a set of online seminars that will take place in 2021, through the British Institute of Historical Research's seminar program, continuing our conversations and collaborations between diverse producers and consumers of family history around the world. The seminars have so far attracted a global audience on zoom.²¹

This helps to explain why I and many others have become increasingly interested in creative engagements with the past and why these kinds of projects have increased in number in recent years. Some of the most successful public history projects are media-based and as part of a current Australian Research Council funded project I am working on with a team of archaeologists, heritage consultants and historians in the Blue Mountains I hope to encourage public history scholarship and creative outputs. Creative public history has the potential to reach far wider audiences than scholarly and only written outputs of public history. One of the most successful public history projects in Australia in recent years is *The Killing Times*. This involved a team of academics based at the University of Newcastle and journalists working for *The Guardian* newspaper creating a fantastic online resource revealing the history of Frontier Wars across Australia – wars that many families were deeply imbricated within.¹⁵ The project won a NSW Premier's History Award in 2019.¹⁶ Academic and public historians have long complicated the picture of the settlement of Australia, providing evidence of the relations between white settlers (whether forced migrants or free) and Indigenous peoples. Australians have become increasingly aware of these discoveries and their implications and how they can encounter history through genealogy. This site is an excellent example of collaborative public history practice having a significant social and political impact.¹⁷

It is clear from examples like these that networks and teams help to facilitate our work as public historians. While UTS' Australian Centre for Public History still undertakes fantastic public history research and outreach work in late 2020, as I suggested above, it became clear to me that there was no network that bound us all together nationally and/or regionally. After discussing the possibilities with my Canadian colleague David Dean (who sits on the IFPH committee and has been involved with a network of Canadian public historians) and my Australian colleagues Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton, we decided to establish a national network for the Australasian region.²²

The aim of the new Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand Public History Network is to develop public history across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand by creating opportunities to communicate, meet and share knowledge among individuals and organisations who practice public and applied history in the academy, communities, industry and professions. We aim to promote teaching, research and engagements between these diverse communities and encourage best practice through an online portal.

There are a number of history organisations across Australia and New Zealand such as Museums Australia, Museums Aotearoa, the Australian Historical Association, the History Council of NSW, family and local historical societies, heritage councils, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, AIATSIS, the History Teachers Associations, Oral History Australia, the National Oral History Association of New Zealand and the Federation of Australian and New Zealand Historical Societies. However, members of these groups who understand themselves as public historians do not always communicate effectively with each other about public history. This network will encourage national and international communication and collaboration at a time when we need to emphasise the cultural and social benefits of public history learning, teaching and community engagement for everyone. It fosters citizen public history.

The main vehicle of the Association will be a website based at Macquarie University's Centre for Applied History which will feature, for example, publications of different kinds related to public history, new

courses, notices of events, discussions between members and information about current projects seeking assistance. It will be open to all who subscribe – our models are the Australian Women’s History Network and Australian Migration History websites – and we aim to host an annual/biannual Public History Award for an outstanding publication or project.²³ In 2020 the Centre for Applied History partnered with the Professional Historians Association to award a new applied history prize.²⁴

The purpose of the award is to encourage historians, at all stages of their careers from students to retirees, to produce a creative work of applied history drawing on their research. It aims to promote the value of public history and the pursuit of history as a rewarding professional career and productive interest. The winners in 2020 were Martha Ansara and Robynne Murphy for their entry, the documentary *Women of Steel*. The film represented the history of Wollongong’s prolonged 1980-94 ‘Jobs for Women Campaign’ to gain employment at the BHP steelworks. At the heart of their story was the demands of migrant working-class women battling for equal opportunity to work at the steelworks.²⁵ The Professional Historians’ Association and the Centre for Applied History hope to encourage the production of diverse creative history projects, like this, bringing as wide an audience to public history in Australia and beyond as possible.

We soft launched the network website in 2022 and began with blog contributions from historians in and outside academia and heritage professionals from across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand describing the state of the public history field in their respective areas.²⁶ Authors have traversed the history of public and applied history across New Zealand, the Northern Territory and Western Australia and we are expecting submissions on Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland. One author’s take may not be the same as another’s and we hope to facilitate the writing and publication of further blog posts from all these different parts of Australasia. We hope all public history practitioners and scholars from across the region will participate in a collegial conversation about the state of public history so that we might learn from each other productively.

In her post for the website professional historian Fiona McKergow writes about the valuable bi-cultural commitment to history in public across diverse forms in New Zealand and an attentiveness to kaupapa Maori – Maori ways of doing, being and thinking. While Aboriginal public history, especially with regards to land rights, native title and family history is thriving in Australia we lack this valuable bi-cultural New Zealand perspective and approach. Other authors including Robyn Smith in the Northern Territory, Jane Lydon and Kate Gregory in Western Australia, Kate Bagnall in Tasmania, Alicia Cerreto in Victoria and others who reveal the diverse practices of public historians across Australia. Public historians in Australia are, however, keeping a close watch on the Reconciliation Action Plans – RAPS – which various state and federal government agencies are adopting including NSW’s Treasury, the most powerful department in the state, which emphasise the recognition of Aboriginal ways of acting and knowing.

Members of the network hope that many public historians working in a variety of fields will consider joining with us. If you have any questions about the network and would like to join, please get in touch with me. If you are interested in this regional network, you may also be interested in joining the International Federation for Public History or perhaps creating your own regional or national network. The IFPH is committed to encouraging the development of national and regional networks globally. Public history is one of the most rapidly growing fields of history and these recent global initiatives demonstrate that. There are new programs, degrees, associations, journals, conferences and discussions appearing in all parts of the world, as you can see by reading the IFPH’s most recent newsletters.

The IFPH encourages new profiles, approaches and languages in public history with the aim of making public history more diverse and international. It offers online workshops, supports conferences, encourages networking, facilitates discussion and offers resources for new programs and associations, and for new scholars and practitioners. It has a dynamic social media presence, a dynamic blog and its own Vimeo channel (all available on the website).²⁷

Successful public history practice in Australia and elsewhere is founded on teamwork. I hope that the kind of collaborative project work undertaken at the Centre for Applied History at Macquarie University and the Australian and New Zealand Aotearoa Network of Public History will expand in the future and make an impact on the academy and outside of it. We live in an age seemingly so self-centered and narrow-minded and we all need greater hope for the future. Therefore, we need to focus on teamwork and collaboration now and in the future. I want public historians to make clear to everyone the significance and value of history in all of our lives. Public history needs to work together to produce scholarship and clear evidence of its value and significance to the academy, myriad organisations as well as ‘ordinary people’.

Endnotes

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