

## THE HISTORICAL COMMUNITY OR, SEEING THE WHOLE ELEPHANT<sup>1</sup>

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Jimmy Durante, so it is said, had an act in which he came on stage followed, unknown to him, by an elephant. A policeman would ask him, 'What are you doing with the elephant?' Durante would then turn around, seeing nothing but a mass of wrinkly grey skin. 'What elephant?', he would say. The moral of the story is that one should always stand far enough back to see the whole elephant, in order to know what it is.

There is also a point here about fragmentation. As a History undergraduate in the late 1960s, I understood that you chose a subject or subjects each year from those available, and that if you wanted to maximise your chances in the examination you selected topics from the subject in which you specialised. You therefore specialised within your speciality. As our university courses moved on, we focussed on permanent areas of specialisation. We understood there were other areas, but that one should keep to one's own. We also understood, more distantly, that history was studied in other institutions, and that it had a public aspect, expressed in the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, but (and this is especially true of non-Australianists like me) we had little idea of the scale or character of historical activity outside the university.

I have caricatured the situation to make a point, which is that it was not until I and others formed The History Institute, Victoria, that I, for one, came to appreciate the true dimensions of the history industry, broadly defined, comprising not only academic institutions (schools, universities, colleges) but also historical societies, genealogical societies, heritage groups, museums, archivists, librarians and sections of the media. It is easy to see our own piece of this; it may be less easy to see the whole elephant, or to understand the trends which affect it and have affected it in the past.

A useful case study in these trends was provided by Professor R M Crawford, in an address to The History Institute's inaugural 'Historians on history' forum at the University of Melbourne in 1984, later published as *Making History* (1985). Crawford was appointed the Ernest Scott Professor of History at Melbourne University in 1937, and held it until his retirement in 1971. The changes in academic history over that time are significant. In 1937, for example, no Australian department of History had more than two full-time teachers, and when Crawford came to Melbourne he had to teach six different courses, with a background in only one of them, as well as running the department. There were no more than a dozen university historians in the country at that time. By 1971, the number had risen to 750. As a result of the expansion, the old established universities, particularly Melbourne, played a dominant role in generating staff for the new courses and new institutions: no less than 43% of Melbourne University honours graduates in History during

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the Crawford years went to jobs in tertiary institutions.<sup>2</sup> A critical point for later developments was that by the mid-1970s, the tertiary sector was largely closed to these graduates as government funding declined and the institutions ceased expanding.

Overlapping the expansion and subsequent decline in tertiary education, including history, was a vast growth of activity in non-professional history. Up to the mid-1970s, this was most obvious in the growth of the National Trust. The National Trust (South Australia), for example, established in 1955, shows a growth in membership from about 1,000 in 1962 to about 7,500 in 1975, and there are indications during that time of a shift in emphasis away from natural heritage towards built heritage, that is, towards the historical side of the Trust's brief.

Numbers of National Trust members in South Australia have grown to a little more than 8,000 since 1975 and appear to be more or less stable at that level. Nonetheless, the historical interest expressed through the Trust continued to grow, but was expressed in other ways. For example, figures relating to 79 current South Australian historical societies (of a total of about 120) for which foundation dates are available, show just four established before 1950, five between 1950 and 1960, 28 between 1970 and 1980 and 35 so far in the 1980s. Of course, these figures do not include societies no longer in existence, and take no account of the change in character of societies over the period. The early societies, for example, were relatively broad-based, and include some which were not primarily historical, but which carried out historical activities as part of their programme. These early societies included the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (South Australian Branch), the Pioneers Association of South Australia, the Railway Historical Society, and the National Trust (South Australia) itself. The broadly inclusive character of these societies meant that their individual memberships were intrinsically larger than most of the more specialist societies that came later, but there is no doubting the overall growth in the non-professional historical movement of which they were part.

As I have suggested, in South Australia at least, historical societies grew to be more specialised in their interests, particularly in their emphasis on local history. While strictly local historical societies have been known in New South Wales since 1920<sup>3</sup>, the first such group in South Australia was (on current information) the Lobethal Historical Society, established in 1954, with further local societies following in the 1960s. The real explosion in South Australian local societies, however, roughly coincided with the levelling off of National Trust membership, and was marked by the establishment of 19 purely local groups in the 1970s, together with a small number of occupational ones, such as the South Australian Police Historical Society (1977) and the South Australian Gas Company Historical Group (1978). A further such group, the

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<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Serle, 'A survey of Honours graduates of the University of Melbourne School of History, 1937-1966', *Historical Studies*, 15, no. 57, 1971, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Gail Griffith, 'The historical view from the Royal Australian Historical Society', in *Locating Australia's Past*, Local History Co-ordination Project, School of History, University of New South Wales, 1988.

Highways Department Northfield Depot Heritage Group, was set up in 1980. In this explosion of historical societies, the establishment of the Historical Society of South Australia in 1974 represented something of a landmark, symbolic of the fact that, on present information, about 80% of historical societies in South Australia were formed in the last twenty years.<sup>4</sup>

Trends in other areas of the history and heritage movement appear to reflect the same developments as those affecting the historical societies. Librarians in all states will testify to the surge in numbers of genealogical societies, and in the numbers of people generally who are interested in family history. Genealogy is now one of the most popular of all leisure pursuits. Similarly, the expansion of the museum area has been an obvious feature of the last five years, fuelled by the various centenaries. Major museum developments have now taken place, or are planned, in every state, as well as the ACT and the Northern Territory. Visitation at museums has grown accordingly, and can now be numbered in the millions. At the same time, the popularity of historical themes in the mass media which has been a feature of the last 10 or 20 years continues unabated, with a significant effort being made by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, which in the early 1980s began to produce a series of excellent oral history programmes (including 'Taim bilong masta' on Australians in colonial New Guinea) and went on in 1985 to establish a special Social History Unit to deal directly with historical issues.

Interestingly, the expansion of the universities, including departments of History, ended at about the same time as a more sharply focussed non-academic interest in history, expressed in the boom in historical societies described above, began. The Hayden Budget of 1975 marked the end of university expansion, roughly coinciding with the establishment of the Historical Society of South Australia, symbolic of the rise of the local historical societies at least in South Australia and perhaps nationally.

Honours and higher degree graduates previously absorbed in considerable numbers by the tertiary institutions now had to find their own way in the wider employment market to an extent not experienced for 20 years, and there were many more of them than there had been before. There were at least two important results of this, in the form of the development of professional societies for trained but non-academic historians and, a little later, the establishment of Public History courses in the universities.

Essentially, the new professional associations have grown out of two main concerns. The first has been to establish and expand a market for the historical training provided by the universities, and the second has been to promote the interests of the history sector, to heighten the community's awareness of historical questions, and to develop a sense of the cultural importance of a sense of history.

The idea that historical skills, applied to the writing of history, have a place

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<sup>4</sup> Figures relating to societies affiliated with the Royal Australian Historical Society show an expansion of similar scale, but beginning earlier with 31 societies in existence in 1960, 134 in 1970, 203 in 1980 and 247 in 1987 (Griffith, 'The historical view ...', p. 12).

outside the tertiary institutions, is relatively new, at least in the emphasis that has been placed on it. Previously, most people would have recognised the aims of the Melbourne University History Department from the late 1930s, as outlined by Professor Crawford, as describing the social usefulness of a training in history. 'Turning out historians was an acceptable by-product of the main task', said Crawford in 1984, a task

which was to equip one's pupils for a more interesting life and train them to act with some independence of mind and a readiness to consider evidence, in whatever field of activity they went into.<sup>5</sup>

This is still recognisable as an appropriate objective for an academic training in history, but from the early 1980s there was a growing insistence on the contribution that academically training historians could make outside the tertiary institutions, as historians, and on the need to gain acceptance of the skills of such people in a wider market.

The first results of this were seen in South Australia, where the History Trust of South Australia was established (at first as the Constitutiona Museum Trust) in 1978. The History Trust is primarily concerned with the administration of museums, but it also has a brief to promote an understanding of South Australian history generally. Two years after the Trust's establishment, the Association of Professional Historians (APH) was established, also in South Australia, the prime movers being a university historian (Dr Brian Dickey, now Reader in History at the Flinders University of South Australia) and Peter Donovan, who has since become well known as a freelance professional historian. As Brian Dickey put it, the founders of the APH 'were aware of the need for a professional structure within which graduates of tertiary institutions who had majored in history could continue their interest in the writing of history.' The Association was formed, he said, 'to establish, maintain and encourage adherence to professional standards and ethics amongst those writing and researching history outside the confines of university scholarship.'<sup>6</sup>

The model the founders of the APH had in mind, if there was one, was professional associations such as the Australian Society of Archaeologists and their aim was basically a trade union one, to promote the work of qualified historians and maximise their rates of payment and conditions of work. They did not see it as their role to promote a sense of history in the community. The APH's membership is limited by its constitution to those with professional qualifications in history, and its activities have been in pursuit of professional objectives, so that it has produced a standard contract for historians, and a statement of professional ethics for historians. It also keeps a register of qualified historians available for work, to whom it relays enquiries from potential clients. It also runs an intermittent professional development programme of 'members' nights'.

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Stuart McIntyre (ed.), *Making History*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Fitzroy/Ringwood, 1985, p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> B D Dickey, letter to the Editor, *Vestes*, 24, no. 2, 1981, p. 52.

Like other associations, the APH's relations with academic historians have been ambivalent. Thus while there is some measure of support for it at the Flinders University of South Australia, at least to the extent of Brian Dickey's involvement, it is probably fair to say there is less evidence of such support from the University of Adelaide, where the Department of History exhibited some difficulty with at least some aspects of the Association as far back as 1982. The Department has been little involved with the APH since then.

The APH has been an influential model for professional associations in other states. In its emphasis on its professional trade union role, it exists in contrast to The History Institute, Victoria, in the formation of which in November 1981 I was much involved. As the Institute has proved to be highly distinctive in its character, it is worth tracing its development to show how the concept embodied in it took shape.

The original model for the Institute, first proposed in 1970 by Professor John Poynter, now Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, was the Institute of Historical Research at the University of London. The London Institute was, and is, an academic body, running its own research projects and providing a central reference point for postgraduates in the London colleges and for itinerant academics and postgraduates from overseas.

Following the contraction of employment in the universities from the mid 1970s, Geoffrey Serle, Reader in History at Monash University, in 1979 circulated to the various academic departments an expression of concern regarding the job prospects of History graduates. As one of those concerned, I responded with a proposal addressed to a range of relevant people for an Institute of Historical Research as originally suggested by Professor Poynter in 1970. However, efforts made at senior levels in Melbourne University to establish an Institute of Historical Research within the University during 1980 proved unsuccessful.

I then proposed to various members of the Melbourne department that such an Institute could be established between the four Victorian universities at department level. The idea was taken up in the Department by Stuart McIntyre and David Phillips, and at a meeting of the four departments in November 1981 it was agreed to form a working group to establish an Institute of Historical Research.

In keeping with the original 1970 proposal, the Institute at this stage was still seen as an essentially professional and academic body, a linking mechanism between historians in the four universities, postgraduates and other qualified individuals outside the universities, with the emphasis in much of the discussion about it on its role in co-ordinating academic activities in the four universities. However, in discussions among the working party a rather different animal was conceived, and the Institute came to assume a quite different and unique character. Central to this change of course was a discussion paper by Professor Greg Denning, of the Melbourne department. Among other things, he proposed a new name, the History Institute ('Victoria' was added later). More importantly, he broadened the concept. 'The goal of

the History Institute', he wrote,

should be much broader than inter-university cooperation. It's a philosophical point about the function of history in tertiary education and in culture. Professionally, historians have been too passive in accepting the demise of history in education and in allowing the label of irrelevance to stick. The historical enterprise in its widest sense is vast in Victoria alone. In teaching, communications, government departments, resource centres of libraries, museums, archives, local historical societies, there is a history industry that is probably Victoria's largest industry. Yet we tend to act as if the only really important product of our segment of that industry is to produce the tiny proportion of postgraduates who will become academics. A History Institute should be both the interface between the universities and colleges and a much wider community as well as the focus of interest and use of those who are professionally historians in the widest sense and those who like to nominate as one of their principal pastimes an historical interest.<sup>7</sup>

This formulation was decisive for its sense of the breadth of the history sector (or industry). With hindsight, one could at the same time be impressed by its failure to register the needs of professional historians outside the universities and by the prominence in thinking about the Institute of its proposed role in promoting purely academic co-operation.

In the event, what resulted from these discussions was an organisation of unrestricted membership, which included among its objectives not only the promotion of the interests of professional, non-academic historians, but also that of a broad public interest in and understanding of history and historical research. The co-ordination of postgraduate programmes and other areas of common interest restricted to the four departments faded from the Institute's list of objectives, though annual or biennial postgraduate conferences have since become among its most successful activities. On this greatly broadened basis, The History Institute, Victoria was launched at a public meeting in May 1982. As its honorary secretary, I was able to gain funding for it from a combination of sources within the four universities, supplemented by membership fees, and the Institute was in due course installed in its own offices, with its own reception/typist.

Despite the lack of prominence of non-academic professional historians in early thinking about the Institute, it quickly acquired a trade union role in serving the interests of its professionally qualified members. The establishment of a Sub-Committee on Commissioned Histories was one of its earliest acts, leading to a set of guidelines produced by the freelance historian Andrew Lemon for the guidance both of sponsors and writers of commissioned histories. The Institute has also been involved in giving direct advice on the initiation and management of commissioned history projects.

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<sup>7</sup> Victorian Institute of Historical Research, Working Party papers, January 1982 (unpublished).

But the Institute is nonetheless a different kind of organisation from the APH and bodies modelled on it. To begin with, despite its efforts to promote the work of professionally qualified historians, it is not primarily a professional body. Its work is mainly in liaison, in linking and promoting the interests of historians and those with an interest in history, whether they be historians or postgraduate students in History and other departments of the universities, archivists, librarians, teachers or members of the general public with an interest in history as practised at a professional level.

With its relatively substantial, though threatened, funding base, the Institute has been able to operate and staff its own office, while an open membership policy has produced a membership of about 400. Apart from promoting professional employment, the Institute has also been a successful organiser of historical conferences and has lobbied government on issues concerning the history sector and on heritage matters.

By 1982, therefore, two models were available for organisations of professional historians outside the universities. While the Institute model has been attractive to many, and is one to which the Institute and, for that matter, I myself remain committed, the APH's example is the one which has had the greatest influence in other States. Thus in 1984, a group of historians in Sydney, including some in academic positions and others not employed in the universities, established the Professional Historians Association (PHA), a body with perhaps the most thoroughgoing professional orientation of any such organisation in the country.

Maintaining a careful distance between itself and the universities, the PHA operates with strict membership criteria and relatively high membership fees. Its objectives include the promotion of history in the community, but its activities are mainly directed towards the promotion of the professional interests of its members. In 1987-88, for example, it produced a brochure promoting the concept of commissioned history which was sent to the town clerk, town planner and librarian in every local government area in New South Wales, and it prepared a chapter, 'Employing a historian', in the Local History Co-ordination Project's book, *Locating Australia's Past* (1988). Like the Institute and the APH, the PHA has assisted with the drafting of advertisements, with project guidelines and with the selection of historians for commissioned work, while its register has been used by a steady stream of potential clients, and its newsletter, *Phanfare*, has been popular with commissioning organisations as a place in which to advertise for historians.

A fourth organisation, the Professional Historians and Researchers Association (PHR), was established in Perth in 1988 under an interim committee. It was publicly launched in mid-1989. Like the APH and the PHA, its objectives are primarily professional, including the promotion of the concept of professional history and research in the community, establishing a code of practice (now completed, together with a system of professional accreditation) and a register of members available for commissioned work, the provision of advice on employment, the dissemination of information useful to its members, the professional development of its members, and maintaining links with similar organisations.

The PHR broadly follows the APH model as a professional association rather than one devoted to liaison activities like The History Institute, Victoria, except that its membership is broader than those of the Adelaide and Sydney organisations, including professional researchers from other areas of the social sciences. By October 1990, it had achieved a membership of 71, a healthy figure reflecting not only the felt need for such an organisation, but also its broader base.

So between 1981 and 1989 organisations representing professional non-academic historians were established in all mainland States except Queensland, and that State joined the fold in mid-1990 with the establishment of the Queensland Historians Institute (QHI). The QHI is another professional body on the APH model, and by October 1990 had achieved a membership of 29. Tasmania is currently (October 1990) the only State without an equivalent body.

Broadly speaking, there is agreement between these organisations on the need to promote professionally written and properly remunerated history. Beyond that there are some continuing areas of debate between them. One of these is the extent to which they should be concerned with the promotion of an historical consciousness in the community. On the face of it, the only body with a clear commitment to this is The History Institute, Victoria, but in fact the picture is modified in some States by particular circumstances, so that at least some of the Institute's role is carried out in South Australia by the History Trust of South Australia, though the Trust's overriding concern with managing its museums has so far prevented it from going far in this direction. Similarly, in Western Australia, the Centre for Western Australian History has a brief for the promotion of at least the history of that State. At the same time, some of the Institute's public role is carried out in New South Wales by the Local History Co-ordination Project.

The extent to which the professional organisations should have a broad commitment to the promotion of history in the community raises a second area of contention, that of whether membership should be restricted. Clearly, an emphasis on the promotion of professional skills prevents most of the associations from opening their membership to all comers, and it has appeared to some that The History Institute, Victoria, as the exception, is doing less than it might to promote the writing of history by trained professional historians. In practice, however, open membership has not prevented the Institute from promoting professionalism in history writing, though it has perhaps restricted its ability to promote the work of its own professional members. And while it has been said that the Institute's membership policy inhibits national cooperation between all the associations, perhaps leading to the creation of a national body, this issue appears resolvable by the adoption by the Institute of some form of professional accreditation. Whether such a national association is intrinsically worthwhile is of course another matter.

The formation of the professional associations has been one of two important effects of the closure of the universities as areas of employment for historians. With the movement of historians, writing as historians, into a range of other

areas, including commissioned history, a second effect has been the establishment of courses in Public History in the tertiary institutions.

There are at least two such courses, a postgraduate course in Public History at Monash University and a graduate diploma course in Applied History at the New South Wales University of Technology. In addition, there are various courses in local history which cover some of the same ground. While this is not the place for a detailed description of these courses, it is worth noting their common aim of providing their students with the skills necessary to enable them to produce historical material for a general, nonacademic market in the forms demanded by that market. The University of Technology course is thus aimed at students with experience in history or with expertise in production (radio, film or museums) and an interest in history. The course is intended both to provide an opportunity for critical, reflective work on practices in public history, and to impart practical skills to enable students to work professionally in a range of areas of applied history. Units of study cover material culture (including museums and heritage sites), oral history, the use of documents, historical writing, the use of visual and aural records, history in television and film popular representations of history, and Aboriginal history.

By comparison, the Monash Public History course is designed for students with a prior training in history and envisages future employment more in government and heritage areas, as well as in the writing of commissioned histories. Once again, however, the course includes the provision of practical skills missing from many normal History courses, in areas such as the interpretation of maps, archaeology, photography and the technical aspects of commissioned history-writing, including contracts, copyright and project management.

The concept of Public (or Applied) History courses, as distinct from most standard History courses, raises one or two questions about academic history courses in general, such as: if Public (or Applied) History courses are necessary to equip students to employ historical skills in a nonacademic environment, what, given the closure of the academic job market, is the purpose of most standard History courses? We could argue, and perhaps we should, that History provides a general intellectual training which can be applied in any area of endeavour, and that it is important and interesting to look at the nature and causes of great events and processes, but there is surely also some point in looking for more direct and practical benefits for the acquisition of historical skills, or the rationale for History is little more than that for humanities courses in general. So if graduates of standard History courses are not equipped to produce history for a nonacademic audience, this is a problem which might perhaps be addressed in standard History courses rather than via an overlay called Public or Applied History. The point is not original<sup>8</sup> but bears repetition.

The expansion of history as a field of interest over the last ten or twenty years has indeed been considerable. In discussing this, I have charted, it, however

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<sup>8</sup> I am indebted for it to Chris McConville, then lecturer in the Monash course, who made it at the national conference on Public History convened by The History Institute, Victoria at the University of Melbourne in May 1989

briefly, through the growth of academic history up to the mid-1970s, its subsequent decline, the burgeoning of the history and heritage movement (first through the National Trusts, and then through the historical societies), and the rapid development of non-academic professional associations and the establishment of academic courses targeted on non-academic employment. For those involved and sympathetic to the idea of history as a broadly based cultural activity, there is room for satisfaction in all this, after the gloom and uncertainty which followed the closure of the academic employment market.

At the same time, there are hazards in these developments. For one thing, there is some danger of compartmentalising, of 'not seeing the whole elephant'. It would be unfortunate, for example, if the professional associations became too preoccupied with promoting historical professionalism at the expense of supporting a general growth in historical appreciation in the community, if only because the two are in the last analysis interrelated. It would also be sad to see the universities neglect their responsibility to assist the development of the history sector as a whole, or the historical societies concentrate too narrowly on local history at the cost of gaining a wider perspective on their legitimate local concerns.

In the last analysis, the promotion of an historical sensibility and consciousness is more than the promotion of customary forms of activity. It is also more than the defence of vested interests in the institutions and organisations currently engaged in history. Rather, it has to do with what all historians have in common, which is a sense of the past and of the cultural value for the community as a whole in understanding the past and the perspectives it offers. One of the lessons of the last ten or twenty years has been the scale and diversity of the history sector. We must hope the effect of this will be for each part of that sector- whether it be the tertiary institutions, the local societies, the professional associations, teachers, genealogists, heritage conservationists, archivists or librarians - to appreciate and communicate their own perspectives on the common pursuit.