

**HISTORY RESEARCH BY PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

[By F. RHODES]

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Perhaps the most vital aspect of historical research is that which might be described as "salvaging records." The tempo of modern life brings rapid changes more sweeping than was known to our grandparents. We are indeed confronted with a critical time, when valuable records may be engulfed in a business change of ownership, a fire, the deprivations of insects and the ravages of time. Then the passing of each generation obliterates human minds that, unreliable maybe as to detail, at least told hazily of happenings that might be traced.

The importance of salvaging records was recognised by the Commonwealth Government, which caused to be commenced in 1922 the work of sorting, editing, arranging and publishing the official records contained in vast accumulations of despatches and other documents of Government contained in museums and libraries. Unlike New Zealand, which for upwards of 50 years had no form of governmental authority, and whose early history was eventually exhumed from the log books of sealers and whalers, many of them of foreign nations; Australia had both governmental authority and a documented history from her earliest settlement.

This work went forward to publication of volume 26 of Series I, which carried New South Wales records to December, 1848, and of volume 6 of Series III, which carries Tasmanian records to December, 1827, those of Northern Australia to December 1839, and Western Australian records to January, 1830 or 32 volumes in all. It is lamentable that this most valuable work, "temporarily suspended 26 years ago in 1926, has not progressed past the limits I have indicated. How can we sustain the oft-repeated complaint that Australia is so little known overseas, when we do not consolidate the groundwork, lying ready to our hand, so that even Australians may come to learn the background to the history of their own land.

We should be most careful to avoid, however, the belief that appears to possess our Governments that

the writing of history is ever ended. Human history is in fact a continuing process, growing under the hand of each and all of us. Again, even the most reputable history may be but a skelton covered with little of the red meat of human endeavour. If, on the other hand, historical research is approached from the sensational angle, the resultant history could be much red meat with little skeleton to give it shape.

History is indeed more than a skeleton, however sturdily it may be set up by the exploits of explorers and the work of geographers. It is more than the mere record of discoveries of a new land. It is the record of how the destinies of that land and its people are shaped, the beginnings and development of economic life, the first pulse beat of industry and the stirrings of culture. It is writ by the fossicker for minerals and coloured by his varying fortunes; by the cutter of timber, with his axemen and straining teams; by the surveyor, who translates to paper newly-discovered features of the earth's surface for all to read and comprehend; by the road builder who services new settlement, howsoever remotely placed; and more permanently by the pioneering settler who sets out to cause blades of grass to grow where hitherto forest giants towered. The skeleton that comes from the journals of explorers, at most the work of but a few men, carries the moulded shape that is built upon collected scraps from the life, ambition, hope, progress or failure of hundreds.

I would like to emphasise that the urge to preserve the lesser details of our history is seldom an official urge; that collecting and piecing together the data into a history story is a labour of love that knows not the passing of hours and heeds not the cumulative weight of bodily fatigue. The iron taskmaster of accuracy is of the private conscience, and not of any official regulation or law bearing the sanction of Parliament. Where the State serves up for the instruction of youth only such flashes of the past as are placed in its hand, the history research worker pledges his learning, his comfort and his leisure to the end that he shall not misinform future generations.

Preservation of the minutes of historical records depends now, as it ever did, upon the few who realise with von Sybel that he who knows the whence will also know the whither, for history is the only sure guide

to a correct understanding of our public institutions. There is no other way to learn of the origins of our form of government, of our traditional love of liberty, of the foundation of our religion and the basis of our cultural ideals. A people without a knowledge of their past would be as helpless as a ship without a compass, as purposeless as a man without a soul.

But who should gather the tangled threads of human happenings, and weave them, warp and weft, into the pattern of our national history? Consider the historical subjects associated with the development and growth of the city of Brisbane: its place names and public buildings; its municipal, government and private transport; its ambulance and fire brigade; its cultural and spiritual movements; its recreation and hygiene developments to mention but a few and ask who, if anyone, is doing the research that is essential if the record of all or any of them are to be handed down, in intelligible form, to posterity?

My purpose tonight is to advocate enlisting the aid of young minds in this research, which I believe could be directed and encouraged through the organisation and discipline of the primary State School. Inviting youth to tread this alluring avenue leading back into the past, bordered on either side by the deeds of maybe thousands of people who left their mark and passed on, will I believe encourage them to look with interest upon the pulsing heart of this their young country. If it turned the student of history into the research worker in regard to the history of his district, it would at least ensure that he would learn more of the beginnings and development of the community in which he has his being than he knows now.

Were primary State schools to collect, as part of the routine, the early facts of their district it would bring matters historical into closer contact with the minds of scholars who would learn their local history while helping to compile it. Maybe the first impact upon the scholar-mind would be the importance and new significance of place names, for it is not possible to do much historical research without coming into contact with those sign posts of history. The general present tendency is to regard names on a map as merely incidental to compilation—there had to be place names, and so map compilers and cartographers simply bestowed them.

The truth is that such names grew in number with the development of an area or district, and in meaning as pioneers carved out of virgin land a new centre of human settlement. Every place name commemorates either some human activity or men or women connected therewith. That is why the cemetery, last resting-place of long-gone pioneers, is a valuable repository of clues to link up detached portions of district history.

Local authority records, a practically unexplored field, offer rich reward to the discerning searcher. Names of councillors, of officials and of ratepayers may all be sifted for their place-names significance, and minute books of proceedings may contain a mine of information in regard to long-gone issues that affected the trend of district development.

But with even the best of co-operation and organisation, the intention may easily outstrip execution. Data flow in erratically and slowly, gaps remain stubbornly aloof and confirmation of doubtful items is often maddeningly slow. But if the objective is made to dwarf the difficulties the former will beckon alluringly forward, and the great task moves steadily even if slowly towards completion.

I am happily able to say that this enlistment of fresh young minds to garner the harvest of history took place in Central Queensland through the ready co-operation of the Regional Director, Central Regional Office of the Department of Public Instruction, Mr. A. B. Copeman. That gentleman was prompt to realise the practicability and potential value of the project, and at once set about exploiting the possibilities contained in the 229 State Schools staffed by 550 teachers under his jurisdiction, a hitherto untapped or even suspected source of district historical data. But even so rich a store required exploitation. Approached in a haphazard manner the harvest could have been meagre, vague, patchy and of small value for the purpose of drawing an intelligible historical picture. But little of historical value was omitted from the questionnaire prepared and issued. It required the origin and meaning of the school's name, date it was opened and with how many on the roll, the site of the school relatively to adjacent prominent geographical features, distance from nearest railway station. It required, too, by whom the district was first explored, names of pioneering families, particulars of historical landmarks or sites, build-

ings and documents, as well as the names of any locally-born who had gained fame in a wider sphere, and also any other feature, not enumerated, having special historical interest.

The harvest which followed this careful sowing was rich and varied, for only in very rare cases did it appear that response to the questionnaire was perfunctory. Generally, much care and considerable research went into assembling the data and compiling the returns, and in some cases enthusiasm spread from the school, through parents, to the community, in itself a worth-while achievement. Only time can tell how extensive or permanent will be the effects of this awakening of interest in local history.

When the flow of completed returns ceased, the whole of them were arranged alphabetically in two volumes, and so came into existence an encyclopædia of district history, compiled by its youth, an invaluable source of readily-available information upon hitherto little-known life and development of Central Queensland.

So firmly has the duty of teaching the young taken hold of us, that it occurred to few that, in some subjects, the young might with profit be encouraged to teach itself. We leave to them the picking up of bad English, bad language and bad manners, yet shrink from the idea that youth might apply its budding creative powers to learning how data which are placed in their hands were compiled. Possibly because youth cannot be expected to produce a new Euclid or compile a new set of rules of grammar, we forget that youth might be glad to take a hand in compiling the history of its own land. Yet in a comparatively new land, with many items of historical data slipping unobtrusively into obscurity, the opportunity to have in the field of research many more history gleaners seems much too good to miss.