

On Oxford Street: A Professional and Personal Story

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It has often been noted that a person's professional interests can spring from a personal partiality, and in so many ways that is my story. The sort of history I now write is more often motivated by the personal. And urban history led me down that road. But I would like to start by considering what might be called the 'historiography' of urban history and look at some significant mileposts.

It was at the end of the nineteenth century, in 1899, that the American sociologist, Adna F. Weber, in *The Growth of Cities in the Nineteenth Century*, pointed out something that seems so obvious, and certainly is obvious today:

The most remarkable concentration, or rather centralisation, of population occurs in that newest product

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of civilisation, Australia, where nearly one third of the entire population is settled in and around capital cities.

So the dominance of the city was a phenomenon long observed in Australia's history. Yet it was not a theme that was stressed in the works of most major Australian historians – such as Charles Bean, Ernest Scott, George Mackaness, A.G.L. Shaw, Max Hartwell, Keith Hancock, Manning Clark, Geoffrey Bolton, Patrick O'Farrell and Russell Ward – over the twentieth century. These historians had all come at writing Australian history from their own directions, and it was usually thematic or biographical. So why did urban history emerge when it did? What was the 'sociological history' of its emergence?

One should of course note the impact of Jane Jacobs' 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. But I don't think it is an accident that some of us involved in the development of urban history here in Sydney – people like Max Kelly and Shirley Fitzgerald – came from a background in economic history. Economic history has a predilection for quantification. It was Sir John Clapham, the first Professor of Economic History at Cambridge University, who in 1931 argued that economic history was important *because* it attempted to quantify certain aspects of historical developments. As Clapham pointed out, before we make historical generalizations we need to ask: 'How large? How many? How often? How representative?' And these were pertinent questions to ask when considering urban growth.

Two books by the economic historian Noel Butlin's were seminal here in Australia: *Australian Domestic Product, Investment, and Foreign Borrowing, 1861-1938/39*, published in 1962, and *Investment in Australian Economic Development, 1861-1900*, published two years later. Statistically, they made very clear the important role that the cities had played from the very beginning of our history, in investment, employment, the import and export industries and infrastructure creation.

While the initial colonial settlement placements determined the location of our eventual metropolitan areas, from the very beginning the facts of administering a penal colony – containment of population rather than its expansion – encouraged the growth of an urban society. And from these concentrations came such initial development as the 'staple' trade which cemented the role of the city-ports. The rail networks built from the 1850s – centred on the capital cities in all colonies but Queensland – reinforced their primacy. And manufacturing expansion in the latter part of the nineteenth century – in the cities – consolidated this

pattern of Australian urbanism. All this knowledge was staring historians in the face for over six decades.

So perhaps the *timing* of the emergence of urban history does have a relevance. It emerged in the aftermath of, or in the latter days of, an era of ongoing protest, when there was so much to protest about: 'Ban the Bomb'; anti-war, especially anti the Vietnam war; ideas about protecting the environment; the start of the Green bans; and what we would now call the 'social protest movements' – rights for women and indigenous people. All these were up and running. It was a time when new ideas were emerging.

But it was also the time of the emergence of new sorts of history, histories emphasising social rather than political or diplomatic themes, as in the *Annales* school, a social history focusing on the lives of the common people. It was a time of the new labour history, and a time when economic history emerged as a separate discipline. At the University of Sydney, a Department of Economic History was only created in 1971. For those with an interest in psychology, perhaps there was also an Oedipal element in all this: were we attacking and killing off the father figures of our profession, by rejecting the type of history embraced and practiced by them in previous decades, as a way of showing that 'our time had come'?

So in many ways, and for a variety of reasons, we can say of the very idea of urban history, that by the early 1970s, in Australia – and certainly in Sydney – 'its time had come'. Perhaps all this flux in our profession also had some methodological impacts. One major feature of urban history worth noting is its multidisciplinary nature; it requires acknowledging the diverse nature of 'causality' in history; the importance of geography, the role of politics, the impact of new ideas and the effects of social changes and social movements, to indicate but a few of the factors.

The products of this new focus for a younger generation of Australian historians have been both manifest and magnificent. Think of Sydney, and how many books have been written about aspects of the city's history since the mid-1970s. Over twenty years, the Sydney History Group alone directly published seven collections of essays.¹ Individual historians have all published their own works on the city, and now there is the *Dictionary of Sydney*, an online multimedia historical encyclopaedia of the city. Sydney thus has a written history of far greater depth and diversity than any other Australian city.

And now we come to where the intellectual and the personal entwine. My own work has reflected this process of change, of moving

from general thematic history – as in my post-grad research on banking and economic development, to my early academic work on colonial railways and economic development – to urban focused themes from the late 1970s. My first venture down this road was with *Sydney's Transport: studies in Urban History* in 1983. Then in 1990 came *City of the Plain*, a history of the emergence of Sydney's homosexual and gay subcultures from the 1920s. And with Shirley Fitzgerald, in 1995 we edited *Minorities: cultural diversity in Sydney*. This all led finally to *Street Seen: a history of Oxford Street* with Clive Faro in 2000.

Street Seen is a good example of how the role of all these factors – of geography, of ideas, of politics and government policies, of economic realities and social concerns – can come together in one work of history. Indeed, from such urban-focused works we can read so much that is emblematic of Australian history as a whole. In them, we can see the impact of new ideas, such as with the city beautiful movement, or with the purposes of slum clearance. And much later with the impact of post-war economic and social reconstruction.

We can see the effect of major sociological changes, as with the impact of the motor vehicle and the death of public transport, and the flight to suburbia; or the formation of major immigrant communities in inner-city suburbs in the post-war era, and then, later, the gentrification of those once decaying inner-city areas. We can see the working out of major social developments, as in the early nineteenth century, with the localizing of the early colonial elites in the heights of Darlinghurst overlooking Sydney Town; or a century and a half later, in the late twentieth century, of the start of the 'new' Australian music, much of which began in pubs and clubs along Oxford Street. *Mental as Anything*, *Cold Chisel* and *Midnight Oil* all made their early appearances at the pubs and clubs on that iconic street.

For an historian, there is also the joy of uncovering the previously unknown or previously unacknowledged. And Oxford Street's history certainly reveals much that was not well-known before; things like the fact that Oxford Street actually follows a track, known as the 'Maroo', that was used by the indigenous populations of the area for thousands of years before the arrival of Anglo-Europeans in 1788. Or the hidden multiculturalism of Australian society, back in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when Greeks, Italians, Swiss, Germans, Chinese, Jews, Spanish and Portuguese all lived on and around Oxford Street, being major parts of the street's commercial and community life. Indeed, a quarter of all Germans living in the colony were domiciled in the Bourke Ward. Such was the concentration of the Spanish and Portuguese

in the area that masses were conducted in their languages in the two local Catholic churches.

I spent considerable time uncovering the hidden 'gay' life of the city nearly a century before the 1980s, when the 'Oscar Wildes of Sydney', as one newspaper referred to them in 1895, frequented a pub near what became Taylor Square, and when College Street was the haunt of men who called each other by the names of famous actresses. They also frequented the Turkish Baths in Liverpool Street where it met Oxford Street, or Mr Wigzell's more salubrious emporium on Oxford Street, where the usual middle-class clientele could meet young working-class men on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday evenings when they got in for sixpence – and all could enjoy the pleasures of a little 'cross-class romp'. These are but a few of the phenomena that such an urban history can tell us about.

As for my own involvement, my own life on Oxford Street goes back for over half a century, and was ongoing, but in very different ways. As a child growing up in Maroubra, I remember 'going to town', as we called it then, with my mother, brother and sister. When she went shopping in the CBD, past Hyde Park to David Jones, Farmers or Beard Watsons, she always wore a hat and gloves. But for shopping on Oxford Street, at Buckingham's, Brasch's, Edward Arnolds or Winns Department stores, it seemed only gloves were necessary. I felt great anticipation for the Oxford Street trip, for it also meant that I would have my favourite lunch, which was a meat pie with mashed potato, peas and gravy and tomato sauce, at the cafeteria of the back of Winns store in lower Oxford Street.

Then in the 1960s, Oxford Street saw a new phenomenon, the appearance of the wine bars, when young entrepreneurs bought up the licenses of the old bodegas and grog shops scattered around the area, and turned them from places where the local ladies could have a sherry or a port and lemonade into trendy meeting places for the young and restless. Martin's Bar, opposite the Darlinghurst Court House, was a favourite haunt. The bar staff, male and female, all wore above their jeans those see-through Indian cotton tops with nothing underneath, and worked to the sounds of 'cool' jazz.

By the early 1970s, Oxford Street had also taken on a new ambience. It was home to the emerging gay culture which had fled from Kings Cross because of the impact there of the US and Australian soldiers on R&R leave from the Vietnam war. Drugs, violence and prostitution also drove the emerging gay culture away to a nearby area where rents were still cheap. So Oxford Street saw the appearance of clubs such as

Capriccio's, Ivy's Birdcage and Patches, and bars like Tropicana and Flo's Palace. It was here that the first Mardi Gras took place in 1978 and has been the site of it ever since.

From the 1980s, it was community politics, as an Independent, Clover Moore, took on the major parties, capturing the seat of Bligh from the Liberal's Michael Yabsley. Oxford Street is the main thoroughfare through the electorate, and it was on Oxford Street that Clover set up her office, and where she often attended rallies over issues of concern for her constituents. Even with Clover gone, and reflecting the style of the electorate, an Independent member for Sydney still sits in state Parliament.

Finally, it was this complex history of such a street, and my own experience of the street's diverse life, that led to my own research and writing about Oxford Street, looking at my old haunts and their history with the more detached eye of an historian, but also with a participant's knowledge. Coming full circle, today I live on Oxford Street, in an apartment block that is built on the site of that old department store, Winns, where, as a kid, I used to have my favourite lunch. Some nights, up in my little eyrie, I even think I get a whiff of those long-past meals, that distinctive smell of meat pies, mashed potato, peas, gravy and tomato sauce. But it is just some wafting aroma coming up from the myriad of trendy restaurants that now inhabit East Sydney. Even though I know this to be true, it still conjures up a remembrance of things past.

Garry Wotherspoon, a Sydney-based historian, was the recipient of Australia's Centenary of Federation Medal for his work as an academic, researcher and human rights activist

ENDNOTES

¹ Max Kelly (ed), *Nineteenth-Century Sydney: Essays in Urban History*, Sydney University Press in association with the SHG, Sydney, 1978; Jill Roe (ed), *Twentieth-Century Sydney: Studies in urban and social history*, Hale & Iremonger in association with the SHG, Sydney, 1980; Garry Wotherspoon (ed), *Sydney's Transport: Studies in Urban History*, Hale & Iremonger in association with the SHG, Sydney, 1983; Max Kelly (ed), *Sydney: City of Suburbs*, UNSW Press in association with the SHG, Sydney, 1987; Graeme Aplin (ed), *A Difficult Infant: Sydney before Macquarie*, UNSW Press in association with the SHG, Sydney, 1988; John Shields (ed), *All Our Labours: Oral Histories of working Life in Twentieth Century Sydney*, UNSW Press in association with the SHG, Sydney, 1992; and Shirley Fitzgerald and Garry Wotherspoon (eds), *Minorities: cultural diversity in Sydney*, State Library of NSW Press in association with the SHG, Sydney, 1995.