
The 2024 Lesley Muir Address: Writing a 'Local' History of Australia

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It's a pleasure to be with you this morning to talk about 'local' history, especially in Campbelltown. I have strong memories of this area, but they're a while back now. Forty-three years ago, in 1981, in my first year out of university with a Bachelor of Arts and a Diploma of Education, I took up a job teaching English and History at John Therry Catholic College. Although I was only at John Therry for twelve months – I left Australia in 1982 to live in Germany for several years – 1981 in Campbelltown was a formative year.

It was the school's first year, and some of the buildings were still being completed when we started teaching, including the staff rooms. The English History staffroom was a caravan, or perhaps several, it's a bit blurry now, but I'll never forget the bracing winter mornings I spent marking homework at my caravan desk. It had something of a pioneer feel. When I stepped out of the van, there was nothing but bush, and across the paddock in the distance, a mob of kangaroos could be seen circling the principal's office.

My history classes for years 8 to 10 were a predictable mix of classical Greece, Ancient Egypt and Rome, medieval and Renaissance Europe, and somewhere in the year 9 and 10 syllabus there was a whistlestop tour of Australian history from Federation through the Depression and the World Wars. We devoted little time to Australia and virtually no time at all to the history of Campbelltown itself. Not that that was unusual at the time.

Even if we had studied Campbelltown's history when I taught at John Therry in 1981, it would have likely begun with the story of the discovery of a 'stray herd of cattle' in 1795 by the Nepean River, which apparently prompted Governor Hunter to explore the area further. And from here, we would have moved through the grant of 5,000 acres to John Macarthur in 1805, Governor Macquarie's visit to the area in 1810, and again a decade later, when he returned to officially confirm the town site and named it after his wife, Elizabeth Campbell.

After this auspicious moment, we would have told the story of waves of incoming settlers, the expansion of agriculture and industries, transport and communications, civic institutions, a ghost or two, and

post-war suburban expansion. Or words to that effect: a white foot here, a white foot there. I doubt there would have been much mention of the Dharawal people, their culture, history and language, frontier conflict, or the infamous Appin massacre, which took place less than twenty kilometres away, the result of a military reprisal ordered by Governor Lachlan Macquarie in 1816.

This reminds us, I think, of how radically the idea of local history has changed in the last few decades. The traditional celebratory narratives of community development – spliced with amusing and astonishing anecdotes about pioneer exploits, hardships and achievements with little mention of Aboriginal people – are now far less common than they were in the previous century or more. Today, it would be unthinkable, even preposterous, to imagine writing a local history of any area in Australia that did not include the history and cultures of local Indigenous people, and more importantly, consult them and include their voices.

At the same time, the heyday of traditional 'local history' – defined and instigated largely in tandem with the emergence of local historical societies in the early twentieth century, and later, the family and convict history boom of the 1970s – has now passed. Many local histories in library catalogues are dominated by books published between the 1960s and 1990s. Perhaps there's only so many times you can tell the same story of settler progress, but also, perhaps the new types of local history are online, or taking longer to research and write, and are far more challenging once their authors think through the implications of what they're undertaking. Which begs the question – if you were setting out to write a local history today – how would you define it? And is 'local history' even the right term any longer?

The cliché that all history is local doesn't necessarily help to understand what local history might mean in twenty-first-century Australia. I think there's a range of questions we have to consider before we think of writing local history.

First, where does the local begin and end? Where are its boundaries – geographical, conceptual and temporal?

And who defines these boundaries? Local governments and council boundaries? Electoral boundaries? The audience for the publication? The publisher and market? The historian's personal inclinations?

Take, for example, terms like western Sydney, or the north and south coast. How far west, north or south should we stretch these boundaries? If Parramatta is now the demographic centre of Sydney, isn't it a little less 'west' than it once was? For Sydneysiders the south coast often means only as far as Nowra or Jervis Bay, for Canberrans it's probably Bateman's Bay and surrounds. Yet there happens to be three hundred more kilometres of the south coast before you reach the Victorian border. You might call it 'far'. But my point is that all of these kinds of boundaries are relative and arbitrary. The local is disobedient; it keeps expanding, wanting to move beyond whatever fences we might erect to contain it.

We also need to consider how the idea of local history relates to other histories such as 'community' histories, 'regional' histories and 'histories of place'. Given that the term 'histories of place' – not only within the historical profession but in wider literary circles as well – has been commonplace for decades, it raises a number of questions: What is the difference between local history and a history of place? Given that more recent local histories have sought to connect local history with national and transnational histories as well, is the 'history of place' a more elastic and appropriate way of describing what we once called local history?

Many questions, and I'll come back to them, but at this point I'd like to explain how I've grappled with these same questions in my own work. I think nearly all of my books have been driven by questions that began with the ground underneath my feet. In many ways, I've been doing local history for over thirty years.

In 1993, I bought 10 acres of land on the Towamba River, inland from Eden. I had purchased the land as a retreat, some kind of withdrawal from my life in inner city Sydney. But over time, I came to see how little I (and most of the people living in the area) knew of the area's Aboriginal History.

The genesis of my book, *Looking for Blackfellas' Point: An Australian History of Place* (2002), was one day in 1995, when the builder of our house, Ray Gardaya, a Philippine-American who came to Australia as a young hippie in the late 1960s and had lived in the area for thirty years, pointed across the river and asked me: 'You know what that place over there is called?' 'No', I replied. 'It's Blackfellas' Point', he said. That was the moment of realisation, and knowing intuitively the kind of book I wanted to write. *Looking for Blackfellas' Point* began with my own ignorance of the Aboriginal

history of the area in which we'd bought land and were building a home for our family. In a sense, I was the archetypal settler.

Despite the fact that the place names on my map of the south coast – Pambula, Merimbula, Bega, Towamba – indicated I was living in an area with a strong Aboriginal presence, this presence seemed largely invisible on the surface of settler culture. In this sense, the book reflects my own confrontation with what I came to call a culture of forgetting.

Over a period of five years, from 1997 to 2002, I combed local histories, historical societies and museums, oral histories in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, newspaper archives and the few academic histories that dealt with south-eastern New South Wales, to try and get some picture of the frontier encounter and the way this history had been remembered or forgotten. I also wanted to write an integrated and holistic history, one that tried to examine the economy, religious beliefs, and environmental history, as well as frontier conflict and dispossession.

I soon discovered that the divisive debates around Australian history that were raging in Canberra were right in front of me in my local community. I'll never forget the day in the late 1990s when I saw the word 'SHAME' graffitied three times across the walls of Bega Valley Council Chambers after the Council refused to apologise to local Aboriginal people at the very same time the Howard government was refusing to apologise for the Stolen Generation. It was a reminder that starting from my own experience in the community I was just coming to know, was the most authentic way to write the kind of history I wanted to write.

This kind of history didn't begin in the library, it began with the Country itself and the people who lived *in* and *with* it. It was a way of writing about place that helped to reduce the distance between my work and my sources. I felt part of the history I was writing.

This approach stayed with me throughout my subsequent books, *An Eye for Eternity* (2011), a biography of Australian historian Manning Clark; *From the Edge: Australia's Lost Histories* (2016) – a history of four places that were literally on the edge of the continent and on the edge of the country's historical consciousness – Port Essington, Cooktown, the Pilbara, and the story of the walk of shipwreck survivors along the south-east coast of the continent in 1797, most of whom were Bengali sailors; and *Return to Uluru* (2021), which tells the story of the shooting of an Aboriginal man by a Northern Territory policeman in a cave at Uluru in 1934.

In all these books, particularly *From the Edge* and

Return to Uluru, I wanted to show how easily we allow some places to slip into their allotted position in history – places for leisure and tourism, places to farm or mine, places that we deem to be merely ‘local’, and places that were metaphors for the nation’s vulnerability or the nation’s creation. I wanted to haul histories of place back into our historical imagination, and show how much we miss if we write Australian history only through the familiar landmarks, most of which lie in the south-eastern corner of the continent.

Every history of place has the potential to alter our view of national history. Ideally, these histories touch every aspect of the past: individual, family, community, mob, denominational, institutional, political, social, environmental, cultural and economic history; and they explore the connections between them. Nothing is excluded.

They also demand a synthesis of many different historical sources: oral history (both settler and Indigenous); court and police records, church archives, unpublished memoirs, diaries and correspondence, family archives, newspapers and journals, photographs and film, art, literature and music, flora and fauna, government, museum and library collections, online and electronic sources, meteorological, archaeological, geological and anthropological sources.

Histories of place can’t be categorised because they can’t be limited or sectioned off from other histories. They are in every sense holistic – their gaze internal as much as external – because they also explore belonging and emotional attachments to place; and they often involve the author’s personal immersion in place. Subjectivity is essential – it’s the very point of tension and creativity that has the potential to draw the readers into the story.

Histories of place not only begin with Indigenous history and connection to Country, they ideally include Indigenous voices either as collaborators or quote them consistently throughout, and they also carry this through to the present; and they refuse, as so often happened in earlier generations, to erase the Indigenous presence from the narrative once the settler presence has taken hold.

They also take years to research and write. After all, to truly know just one place can take a lifetime. Finally, histories of place are very much concerned with how local communities have valued their history (or not). In other words, they are preoccupied with the historical consciousness of communities and how this has changed over time. Every place and community has its own version of Australia; its own story of where it sits in the entity and fabric of the nation.

European Australia was born modern – a product of both the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment.



From the outset, it was driven by the restless drive for material prosperity, territorial expansion, mass migration, knowledge and technological progress – the key markers of global capitalism. Yet in its entirety, Australian history is inherently place-bound.

Unlike European history, a story in which people shift from one place to another, forming attachments to multiple places, Indigenous understandings of history can never be divorced from place; never be separated into different categories of time; and never be reduced to narratives of progress and decline. The collision of these two world views remains at the heart of writing Australian history in the twenty-first century.

Whatever label we might use to describe our work – local or community history, regional history, histories of place or national history; the lines that separate them are indistinct and fluid. There’s an undeniable ambiguity and tension in allowing these boundaries to dissolve, but it’s a productive one because it’s precisely these tensions and ambiguities that help us to see the creative possibilities of writing history.

About the Author

Mark McKenna is one of Australia’s leading historians. He is Emeritus Professor at the University of Sydney and the Australian National University. He is the author of several prize-winning books, including *From the Edge: Australia’s Lost Histories*, *Looking for Blackfellas’ Point* and *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark*, which won the Prime Minister’s Literary Award for nonfiction and the Victorian, New South Wales, Queensland and South Australian premiers’ awards. His latest book, *Return to Uluru*, won the Northern Territory History Prize and was shortlisted for the Australian History Prize in the Prime Minister’s Literary Awards.