

REVIEW ARTICLE

CRANKING THE PARISH PUMP: RECENT LOCAL HISTORIES
OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Merle Bignell, *A Place to Meet*, University of Western Australia Press: Nedlands, 1981.

R. Glover, *Plantagenet, 'Rich and Beautiful'*, University of Western Australia Press: Nedlands, 1979.

A. Frost, *Green and Gold*, Donnybrook-Balingup Shire Council: Donnybrook, 2nd edition 1979.

A. Frost, *Baylya-Balinga*, Donnybrook-Balingup Shire Council: Donnybrook, 1979.

S. Lange (ed.), *Pingelly, Our People and Progress*, Pingelly Tourist and Town Beautification Committee: Pingelly, 1981; available from author, Pingelly.

*There are nine and sixty ways of constructing tribal lays
And - every - single - one - of - them - is - right!*

When Rudyard Kipling wrote these lines he was not thinking of the construction of local histories, but the principle is the same judging by the present batch under review. In the outpouring of Western Australian regional and local histories stimulated by the 150th anniversary celebrations of 1979 we can find every known method of constructing tribal lays. The present sample offers a wide range with plenty of scope for comparison and contrast. All are concerned with largely agricultural districts in the Great Southern and the South-West. Each of these districts began its great leap forward with the coming of the railways and the boom of the 1890s, and each experienced trouble during the 1930s depression. None makes dull reading, and each provides some useful insights for the general history as well as introducing some interesting local characters. Collectively they suggest that local historians are growing less mealy-mouthed than

they used to be; it is now permissible to refer to alcoholism, half-castes, and the spirited feuds which enliven so many country towns. But the standard of professionalism among these works varies considerably.

Pride of place should be given to Merle Bignell's *A Place to Meet*, published on behalf of the shire of Katanning. It is not just that the author achieves the standards of analytical narrative which could be expected from her earlier studies of Kojonup and Gnowangerup, but she has also given us an admirable study of leadership in a new rural community. The lion of early Katanning was Frederick Henry Piesse, flour-miller, speculator, cabinet minister under Sir John Forrest and ostentatiously lavish patron of his district. He was the pattern of the self-made colonial magnate of the turn of the century, and the rise and fall of his family dominates Bignell's history as no doubt it dominated the talk of Katanning. F. H. Piesse built the local mansion, Kobeelya, and made sure that his wife was waiting at the main entrance every lunch-time to open the door of his carriage when he returned from his office in the store buildings. He gave great entertainments; he kept a coachman, a gardener, and three housemaids; and, almost inevitably, he gave his sons expensive educations at St Peter's, Adelaide and spoiled them.

The result was an Australian tragedy. After the patriarch's death in 1912 the sons, sporty, handsome, hard-drinking young men with names like Cecil and Melville, went through the estate rapidly. Within ten years Kobeelya was sold for a school. All but one of the sons died young, and as so often happens it was left to a surviving daughter to cherish the family traditions for the historian. And yet the power of the Piesse name in Katanning was so pervasive that in 1930 when Frederick Henry's youngest brother came back after a long absence in England he was able to run for parliament as an independent and oust the Country party veteran who had held the seat for sixteen years. It probably needs to be stressed that Merle Bignell has not given us just a local version of *Dynasty* or *Dallas*. The Piesses are presented in a balanced context with ample justice to their clients, their rivals, and that large everyday majority of farmers and tradespeople who got on with their business. It is a welcome mark of maturity in Western Australian local history that the achievement and the downfall of a family such as the Piesses can be told with unsensational candour in a way which illuminates the social dynamics of a rural community. The tribal elders of Katanning are to be congratulated on their choice of a historian. More, please, Merle Bignell.

Perhaps because it was also edited and published by the University of Western Australia Press *Plantagenet* also conveys a pleasing impression of professionalism, although since it is the work of several hands the structure is more fragmented and there is some loss of sustained analysis. The best of the book can be found in the fourteen chapters on the Hay River district by the editor, Rhoda Glover, and the twelve chapters on the Mount Barker townsite by Margery Bourke; but surely a word of admiration must be found for F. W. Rowe whose seven chapters on Kendenup and the ill-fated de Garis venture, so far as I can judge all absolutely accurate and useful, were evidently written between the author's eighty-eighth and ninety-second birthdays. If *Plantagenet* shire was never dominated by any one family it shows a certain stability—since 1907 there have been only three chairmen of the roads board/shire council—and has obviously nurtured a vigorous and competent historical society whose work can stand as a model for others to emulate.

No doubt it is the bias of an academic, but as a general rule the best local histories are written by people who have either submitted to formal academic discipline or who have participated in historical societies with a proper appreciation of scholarly standards. In the case of the *Plantagenet* historians Margery Bourke is a qualified physi-

cian and Rhoda Glover, after taking an external degree at the University of Western Australia in the lean years just after World War 2 went on to write a master's thesis on the trader, Captain Symers. At Katanning Merle Bignell is a graduate with an established reputation in regional history.

Not that the untrained amateur is necessarily without merit and interest. A former chairman of the Donnybrook roads board, A. C. Frost first published the history of Donnybrook in 1974. Balingup, having been incorporated a few years earlier into Donnybrook shire by a shotgun wedding enforced by the ministry for local government, protested that its own past had been neglected and was equally worthy of record; so Alan Frost duly wrote his second book and at the same time took the opportunity of revising his account of Donnybrook. He brought to the task a familiarity with the country in question and a pleasantly unassuming approach enabling him to treat even the somewhat controversial aspects of his own term of municipal office without overstatement or bias. Within a broadly chronological framework the two books follow an agreeably yarning, meandering course, identifying local characters by their family relationships, business interests, and changing ownership of land. Analysis of social change is not much attempted, though something is conveyed of the lively resentment of Balingup residents against the Forests Department's policy of speeding rural depopulation by buying up farms for pine plantations. It is a pity that more was not said about the assimilation of the substantial Italian community into the district; and perhaps also about the more recent influx of newcomers moving out of the city as a conscious gesture of environmental choice. But Frost is a good enough chronicler to know that accuracy is a duty and a readable style is a pleasure. It is not the least of his merits that he has resurrected the youthful William Grono's Dylan Thomas pastiche capturing the feel of Donnybrook in the late 1950s.

Sylvia Lange's *Pingelly* is a major exercise in participatory historiography. Of its 560 pages more than half consist of over one hundred unedited family histories, their gaps, literary style, and occasional small errors left undisturbed. The remainder consists of sections contributed by a number of hands on such aspects of the district as its naming, its pioneers, its public offices, clubs, and societies, its outlying settlements, and local curiosities. There are several of the latter, as befits a town which claims: 'There is no other place in the world named Pingelly, it is unique and original'. So we are reminded of the mysterious and well attested fall of stones ('varying from pebbles to ones the size of duck eggs') which in 1957 plummeted from the sky for several days on the Donaldson's property at Pumphreys Bridge. And the story of Mr and Mrs Lindsay of Popanyinning (p. 229) sounds like something from Ripley's 'Believe It or Not':

In 1942, Mrs Lindsay suddenly died of a heart attack. Her husband who was working at Bindoon, also died suddenly of a heart attack. These two people both died on exactly the same day, at exactly the same time and of exactly the same cause. Both hearses which carried the two bodies to Pingelly to be identified, arrived at the exact same time outside the Pingelly police station. This is said to be the most unusual thing ever to happen in history.

'The most unusual thing ever to happen in history'; I wonder how Hugh Trevor-Roper or the pundits of the *Revue Historique* (or even the reviewers in the *Australian*) would deal with such a claim. In its fascination with the marvellous and the coincidental historical writing of this kind reaches back to the primitive beginnings of the craft, to Herodotus or to Nennius; but does it have its place in a work published in the 1980s? (And yet Merle Bignell also thinks it worth mentioning that in 1950 the residents of Clive Street, Katanning, included four members of parliament among their number,

each of them sitting in a different legislative chamber. Everyone relishes a coincidence). Meanwhile it must be admitted that the compilation of this history had a marvellous effect on community spirit in Pingelly, and by demonstrating the capacity of local residents to plan and produce such a compilation has played some part in breathing self-esteem and energy into a town which a few years ago might have been thought to be going backwards. Even its errors and omissions have their use, since old Pingelly residents have enjoyed identifying them and amiably arguing about the *real* facts. Indeed a lot of old friendships have been renewed as a direct consequence of this community effort. Undeniably it has been an exercise with value.

And yet is there a risk that serious historians will dismiss local history, and particularly Australian local history, as a recreation for antiquarians and a focus for communal therapy rather than a legitimate field for scholarship? The teaching of Australian history at tertiary level is already embarrassed by the great upsurge of interest in the subject during the last decade, so that Asianists and mediaevalists and other scholars whose numbers are dwindling find themselves conscripted to teach in the Australian field. Because the subject does not appear to require specialised research techniques or qualities of sociological imagination it may be tempting to regard Australian history as the soft option requiring no special skills. Should academic historians seek to avert this risk by insisting that practitioners of Australian history should publish only if their standards of footnoting, verification, and analysis display the same rigour as one would expect from, let us say, the Oxford histories?

After all it is now over quarter of a century since Geoffrey Blainey published his celebrated article assailing the overuse of scissors and paste in local history, and nearly twenty years since Weston Bate reminded us that we should never neglect 'the good old *cause* in local history'. Perhaps it is the fault of empirical historians such as myself. If we had heeded the advice of Connell and Irving and the sociologically minded sector of the profession, never venturing into historical writing without the protective cover of theory, we might have scared off the well-meaning amateurs who believe that the art of good historical writing consists simply of the accumulation of facts which cannot be proved inaccurate. Perhaps it is high time that we distanced the profession from its untrained amateurs.

And yet, and yet. So many of our innocent pastimes ranging from piano-playing to Australian rules have already been annexed for the professional minority, relegating the great majority of mediocre or fumbling performers to the role of spectators. Do we really want to proclaim that the writing of local history is only worth undertaking if we can reasonably expect the standards of Margaret Kiddle? Isn't it the case that some of our best practitioners such as Rica Erickson and Merle Bignell, working without the stimulus and security of consistent interaction with university colleagues, took some time to discover their best form? If their prentice work had been too severely discouraged they might never have gone on to make their contributions to our historiography.

Besides, without exception each of the histories reviewed in this article throws light on wider issues of concern to 'serious' Australian historians. The lesson has been well learned that the Aborigines must not be overlooked. Frost is perhaps the least satisfactory in that he records the total disappearance of a fairly numerous Aboriginal population from the Balingup district without any attempt at explanation, and has not recovered all the oral testimony on the subject which could easily be gathered locally; but he makes a point of telling the story of Bailya, the patriarch after whom the locality may have been named. The Pingelly compilation includes the 1897 reminiscences of the pioneer of the Sewell family, who like many of the second generation of

white Western Australians perceived the 'natives' as 'sly' and having 'no sense of true friendship'; but it also takes care to record community concern in more recent times for the well-being of the Aboriginal minority, and makes a point of including the local branch of the Kickett family among the representative family histories of the district. It is a pity that the opportunity was not taken to secure a direct contribution from the Kicketts and other Aboriginal families, at least through the medium of oral history.

Students of Aboriginal history and women's history may appreciate some of the material in *Plantagenet* suggesting that during the 19th century, whatever the conflicts on the male side of the frontier, there was a good deal of sisterhood between Aboriginal women and the wives of pioneer settlers. The white women learned bush herbal remedies, edible roots, and the fruits of the forest, and looked after each other in childbirth:

Mrs Garrity was first attended to by a native woman, who then gave birth to her own baby, attended by Mrs Garrity. Three days after the births, both mothers were up and out, chasing sheep in the bush. (pp. 49-51)

In a later generation community spirit in the district's women seems to have been encouraged by the 'high example of competence and service' displayed by Dr Olivia Walker. Educated in the West Indies, Dr Walker graduated in medicine at Newcastle-on-Tyne in 1911, the only woman taking the course, and practised medicine at Tobago until 1927. During World War 1 the British army refused to permit her to serve as a medical officer on sexist grounds, so she spent the war driving an ambulance on the Western Front. Emigrating to Western Australia in her late forties, she practised at Brookton and Mount Barker, including a period during World War 2 when she was the only medical practitioner in the Mount Barker and Albany districts: 'She took up residence in the house opposite the hospital with Hetty (her devoted housekeeper) and her two adopted children, a boy and a girl.' After her retirement when her sight began to fail she moved to Perth, built kennels, and bred guide dogs, dying in 1979 two months before her hundredth birthday. It is illuminating that this remarkable woman won acceptance and admiration in the Western Australian rural communities of forty or fifty years ago.

Another theme illuminated by our local histories reflects the widespread and versatile technological ingenuity observable in so much of rural Australia during the early decades of this century. Given present-day pressures towards standardised and imported technology it is good to read of personalities such as John Gilchrist (1869-1937), a Pingelly plumber who patented a circular iron stock feeder (marketed successfully in South Australia and Victoria), a wheat pickler, a carbon monoxide rabbit fumigator, and one of the first washing machines as well as a variety of minor inventions. And it was not merely for personal interest that I was delighted to read Alan Frost's account of my Balingup neighbour Bert Walton, stationmaster, newspaper correspondent, and long time leader of the best-known dance-band in the South-West from 1941 to 1976; I had no idea that Bert Walton manufactured his own double bass using a book of instructions published in 1906 and provided by the State Library Service. As he could not get the sycamore and maple recommended in the book he worked in blondwood and created a double bass of better tone and carrying power than many imported instruments. There is all too much reason to suspect that this kind of technological skill and enterprise, once common in rural Australia, will shortly require artificial preservation in historical museums.

Quite apart from the pleasure which they give their local audiences, histories of Australia's country towns and suburbs continue to be useful for the light they shed on

wider issues. Accordingly their quality is important. The amateur should not be discouraged, but he or she (it is usually she) needs to share with the old-time technological innovator not only the willingness to give it a go but also the readiness of the Bert Waltons of this world to avail themselves of accessible expert information. There is hardly a district in Western Australia without university graduates and others with an educational background which fits them to learn the basic skills of historical writing. With the expanded availability of external tuition it is no longer necessary to study in near-isolation as Rhoda Glover had to do. The network of country and suburban historical societies provides a readymade communications system through which academic historians and experienced non-academic writers of history can share the skills of their craft with aspiring novices. Nor need this be left to the over-burdened Australian historians. If colleagues in other fields are willing to share the responsibility of establishing contact with amateur local historians it could result in a widening appreciation of the approaches possible in local history; we might all learn much from the local histories of other societies, mediaeval and modern, Asian and European, and so enrich our insights into the Western Australian past. If the writing of amateur local history is defective, it is probably a sign that the academics are staying too much in their ivory towers. We should be out there helping to crank the parish pump.