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PREFACE:
Localised Histories for the Waikato Region,
c. 1840s to the Present

In Semester B of 2013, students in the History Programme at the University of Waikato were able to enrol in a Special Topic, HIST380: History Research and Publishing Project. The aim of this paper was to introduce students enrolled in level three to the skills of researching, writing, editing and finally, publishing short pieces of ‘local’ history, with their brief to examine topics in the Hamilton and wider Waikato region. The diverse experiences of studying history before coming to this paper — with some students with New Zealand history in their degree backgrounds, and others without — meant that this expectation has proved challenging. The students have risen to this challenge, devising individual research projects of various kinds, employing different methodologies, and engaging with a range of ideas about ‘local’ history. As they explain below in their Editorial Introduction, themes emerged through the students’ inquiry, and nicely echoed ideas they had gleaned and examined in other history papers and in the course of their life and private research.

Group meetings were held on six occasions in class time, and were used to discuss and debate how the final journal might ‘look’, what it would contain and how we would produce the polished outcome of an online journal with an editorial introduction. In the fifth meeting, the final table of contents was agreed to, and we moved to create this introduction from that arrangement. Students took leadership in writing their own Introduction, and in assembling their own author biographies.

During the first three weeks of the paper, Peter Gibbons was an invited guest speaker. Peter quickly dispelled the idea that local history might be a narrowly conceived form of historical inquiry, preferring instead to emphasise the way in which history might be ‘localised’, and therefore seemingly small topics might have significance beyond this place; readers of this collection, he suggested, should be from as far away as San Francisco. This idea stayed with the students, who took a variety of approaches to help draw out and grapple with this concept of localised history.

Reminding the class of the importance of this idea, I was struck by the way we had, in practice, effectively examined recent critical historical ‘turns’ to the local, as exemplified in the work of Tony Ballantyne, among other historians. Ballantyne’s significant collection of essays, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand’s Colonial Past*, plays with this idea in a few places, with Ballantyne arguing that many local histories tended to reinforce ‘stability’, fixed
relations with place, rather than the multiplicity of identities and relationships that shaped local places and populations. Such limited writing about ‘local’ history then obscures the ways in which local sites are both part of a larger world, and also subject to the forces of mobility and change, and more like clusters of interaction and movement than small microcosms of a national story.¹ While as a class we investigated local history methodologies and writing styles, we also gestured towards a larger set of questions driving new historical inquiry.² However, students were not asked to examine these debates in depth: a future class might be asked to take more of this academic debate into their writing.

These histories represent for many of these students a very first foray into independent research and should be read in this light — as examples of one semester’s work in a paper that was taught for the first time. As the instructor for this paper, I am very proud of what they managed to achieve in a short 12 weeks of study.

CATHARINE COLEBORNE

The essays in this collection represent one part of the semester’s work for the taught level three paper HIST380. We as students had to constantly reflect back on wider historical contexts for our own individual inquiry. In our experience, the concept of ‘localised’ history tended to exclude the exceptional and instead focused on the ordinary people, places, politics and practices of the past. These, then, became our core themes, as this collection goes on to illustrate.

Periodisation loomed as one aspect of class deliberations about the arrangement of these pieces. One straightforward option for arranging the essays was through a chronology; that is, ordering the articles from earliest to latest. This was partly inspired by the approaching 150th anniversary of Hamilton, which was mentioned at the beginning of the paper as a possible connection between our work and the public readership. However, the chronological approach was dismissed by some as too Eurocentric, although all of the essays are written in English, and most of them concern the activities of people of European descent. However, not all of the essays fit neatly into chronological order. Some transcend a single moment or manageable timeframe, and thus we decided to take a thematic approach, which included some chronology as a compromise.

By contrast, a thematic approach is not bound by time. Themes can transcend time and exemplify a larger narrative of the Waikato region and extend beyond the specifics of each topic. We ultimately chose not to use a chronological approach because themes are more inclusive in creating fluid connections and establishing significant patterns throughout the pieces. Themes allow the reading of each piece to be placed into a context which reaches beyond the Waikato region. Constructing themes that would be not only suitable, but also relatable, was challenging: we were trying to correctly represent and position each article and author. We wanted to show how each piece related to the wider context of localised history, without any being categorised as ‘pre-history’.

Immigration is a common thread between a number of the articles. This theme links back to our lecture with Peter Gibbons and his encouragement to look at the project as ‘localised’ history; in other words, how local happenings, peoples and stories have a wider resonance, and connections with worlds beyond the immediate one in which we reside. The theme of immigration is one that is important to the narrative of New Zealand’s history and the whole of the British Empire. Clearly, the high representation of European immigrant local
histories underpinning this essay collection is worth noting. Yet as Peter also pointed out, the Waikato region is enriched with the culture and history of the *tangata whenua*. *Tangata whenua* histories are covered by a small number of our articles, and we acknowledge that perhaps due to the ethnic makeup and personal interests of the class, the content of our spread of pieces does not really represent the significant Māori population and culture of the Waikato region.

The places that have been written about within this journal issue have had a large part to play in the shaping of these local/localised histories. As we have been making our way through this process, the stories have given shape and meaning to places — for example, the meaning behind the name, why the place was created, and the impact these locations have had on making Waikato history what it is today. Many of these places still exist and many people have been able to walk back in time and sense the struggles and triumphs that the place and people have gone through to get to where they are today.

Politics is always present; we could not ignore the different levels and layers of political cultures in these histories. Many events and situations in Hamilton’s past were politically charged. For instance, the ultimate aims of the British government in New Zealand are open to conjecture and remain obscure. The outcome was different from their goals — or was it? For example, practices of land alienation created an imbalance in the colony’s power relations. Gender politics not only shaped the past for women and men and their economic worlds, as separate essays here show, but also created the archival record which in some instances left women invisible. Later, in the twentieth century, the problem of race relations again loomed as a fact of Waikato’s history with the Springbok Tour protests, as one of our essay contributions demonstrates.

Focusing on practices allows for a more encompassing view of the social norms of the time. Many of the social practices of the Hamilton population developed from individual experiences brought by settlers from their countries of origin. Practices can also be an avenue for exploring histories of the average citizen. These practices changed depending on class, ethnicity and gender. Immigrant settlers adapted to the New Zealand context, but also brought with them their own ways of being. A reflection of these different adaptations to the new colony or to later circumstances is also intriguing and relevant to our imagined readership and audience.

For the majority of us, the primary sources were somewhat difficult to locate, leading to many conclusions being drawn from secondary sources. This approach links into a wider context and potentially attracts a diverse audience. Yet we have collectively also used a large
number of primary source materials: items from the Hamilton City Library’s heritage collection, including oral history recordings and materials, as well as its online Kete collection; the Waikato Museum of Art and History; land and survey records; Church records; materials held by the Hamilton City Council; the records and images of the Waikato Health Memorabilia Trust; material held by the Waikato District Council; cemetery records; Te Ara: The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand; the records of historic sites; Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives (AJHRs); and New Zealand Parliamentary Debates (NZPD). We have also used other materials freely available in the wonderful New Zealand Collection at The University of Waikato Library; items and objects from personal collections and archives; Papers Past; diary and private sources; New Zealand Gazettes; and military records.

Our methods of inquiry and analysis have included taking seriously the idea of localised history, and we have been learning more about place, region, and locale in the course of our research. Some of us started with individuals, taking a biographical approach. Most of us have used our skills and training in the textual analysis of sources, looking just as much at what is absent from the record as at what is present. We have also been interested in the role of memory and descendants’ points of view. Overall, we have entered into this task by finding our own ‘place’, our own interests, and have tried to engage historically through our own identities, as well as identifying our academic interest in others’ histories and experiences.

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