RETROSPECTIVE

‘Visionary but Noble’ or ‘Groping Hopefully’: Twenty-Five Editions of the Melbourne Historical Journal

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Kat Ellinghaus is a doctoral student in the Department of History at the University of Melbourne, researching the lives of white women who married indigenous men in Australia, New Zealand and the United States between 1820 and 1930. This article offers a personal perspective on the twenty-five issues that have constituted the history of the Melbourne Historical Journal since its inception in 1961.

Flicking through past issues of the Melbourne Historical Journal inspires in me the same feeling as the shelves of theses which are opposite my desk in the History Department postgraduate study room. It is during the long, reflective, wall-gazing moments so common to the postgraduate work day that I often find myself contemplating with awe the efforts of my predecessors; wondering how they negotiated the trials of thesis writing, what happened to them after they completed, how they thought up that great title or had the courage to tackle such a daunting topic. The Melbourne Historical Journal motivates the same respect. Its contents pages are filled with names both well-known and forgotten, with titles of articles on subjects obscure and mainstream, with the beginnings of careers in academia, and with the work of students who went on to other things. In that sense it seems to sum up what the editors of the 1987 issue called the ‘uneasy territory’ of postgraduate life. Ten years later, their further comments on the problems of funding and career opportunities suggest the Melbourne Historical Journal’s current designation as a postgraduate publication is, however, only the latest of several incarnations. It was founded in 1961, with the support of the Melbourne Historical Society, by undergraduate students hoping to provide a scholarly but accessible forum for the publication of undergraduate work. Editors Anthony Oster and John Ritchie (who is now the general editor of the Australian Dictionary of Biography), second and third year honours students respectively, expressed a desire for the journal to provide a specifically ‘Melbournian’ contribution to history. Anthony Oster admitted that

the aims in announcing the appearance of the Melbourne Historical Journal may seem to be visionary but they are noble. It is a tribute
to the Melbourne scholarship of history which is not local in any sense of the word but has acquired a universal status.

Nine of the twenty contributors to this first volume were undergraduates, although there seems to have been some clash between the editors’ hopes for a ‘high standard which will eventually produce a journal of international significance’ and their observation that ‘a large percentage of undergraduate work is not up to the standard of publication’. The journal included articles by graduates Alison Patrick, Greg Dening, Michael Roe and the last two pages of the yet to be published first volume of Manning Clark’s History of Australia.

In 1962 the same editors announced with pride a second edition, this time in a printed format: ‘Our first edition was put forward tentatively. We groped hopefully to find an interested audience.... Last year it was said that our aims were “visionary but noble”. This edition may make the vision more real’. Volume two was dedicated to Max Crawford to commemorate his twenty-fifth year as Professor of History. Four of the ten contributors were undergraduates and the volume also included Crawford’s lecture on ‘The School of Prudence or Inaccuracy and Incoherence in Describing Chaos’. In this lecture Crawford admitted that the administrative demands of his position had rendered his relationship with history ‘rather like a relationship with brothers and sisters, a relationship, that is, of deep affection taken for granted, affection living too much on a capital acquired in earlier days’.

Although Cameron Hazlehurst (now the Head of the School of Humanities at the Queensland University of Technology) inherited a deficit when he took over as editor in 1963, he spoke confidently in his editorial of subsequent volumes. In an enthusiastic search for funding Hazlehurst even visited the advertising manager of Myer, who made a donation on the condition that its source was not acknowledged. Hazlehurst remembers being summoned into the presence of Professor La Nauze, who wished to indicate to the devoted young editors that ‘a) we were spending too much time on the journal and jeopardising our academic results and b) he was concerned that some established scholars might be misled into thinking we were a serious journal and send good work to us’. While La Nauze’s concerns about Hazlehurst’s academic career were, in hindsight, obviously unnecessary, his misgivings about the quality of submissions had more foundation. Volume three included papers from the well-known Geoffrey Bolton and Peter Westerway, later Secretary of the New South Wales Labor Party.

The third edition also introduced a selection of documents from the Melbourne University archives compiled by Frank Strahan, a feature which was continued for a number of subsequent issues. According to Strahan, the ‘flesh and bones of history’ were surviving letters and diaries from ‘the strong rooms, basements, sheds, and bureau drawers of businessmen, lawyers, wool and wheat growers, and descendants of the pioneers, both mighty and humble’. This masculine and economically orientated history is almost exclusively the subject matter of these early issues of the MHJ, or as Peter McPhee, the manager of volume seven and present head of the Department of History at the University of Melbourne, has put it: ‘the 1960s didn’t start until 1969 in Melbourne! Our concerns were debates about political and intellectual history, and social (let
alone cultural) history was in its infancy in Australia'. Indeed, there is a similarity between the process Stuart Macintyre, editor of and contributor to some of the early MHJs, noted about Manning Clark's numerous volumes of the *History of Australia* and the substance of the articles published in the MHJ:

> From 1962 to 1987 the successive volumes of Clark's *A History of Australia* mark an awakening historical consciousness: at first he tells of explorers and governors haunted by the consequences of their actions; gradually the story expands to acknowledge those on whom they and their successors acted, Aborigines, convicts, failed selectors, the urban poor; women and, still more insistently, Aborigines'.

While volume four did contain a political analysis of the government administration of Victorian Aborigines, it was not until 1977 that an article devoted to women's issues was included. This was no doubt partly due, however, to the five year lull between volume eleven in 1972, and volume twelve in 1977, years which encompass the beginning of second wave feminism in Australia.

Volume four was also notable for Ken Inglis' tribute to Kathleen Fitzpatrick, one of Australia's first female academics, on her retirement from teaching. Inglis provided a pessimistic but still pertinent description of the miracles history teachers were expected to perform:

Sitting in a lecture is an unlikely place to discover a sense of the past. Men and women love and pray and suffer, work and fight and play; they die, leaving on earth almost no evidence about themselves except what happens to have been put on paper; scholars with varying degrees of imagination write books about them; a lecturer reads one or more of these books and is employed to address twice a week for fifty minutes a number of 18-year-olds equipped with pen and paper. In two or three other subjects that week, for 26 or so weeks that year, the student is also taking notes. If, as he sits there writing, the student's mind is taken via the lecturer's voice, the scholarly pages and the documents, past the death of men and women to their lives, and if he is led to contemplate those lives with wonder, or horror, or sympathy, or some other response that is genuinely his own -- if that happens, surely it is a miracle.... I wonder how many people in this place discovered a sense of the past by attending Professor Fitzpatrick's lectures.

Eminent sociologist Bob Connell, one of the editors of the fourth volume, remembers that the small, hard working group which produced the journal had a strong sense of the distinctiveness of the 'Melbourne History School'. Connell remembers that the MHJ:
in those days was a kind of fantasy, that undergrads could produce real scholarship, but the sort of fantasy that brought reality into being. It was very much a product of the honours stream, pretty much a world to itself and not conscious of the character or needs of the pass students, let alone a wider audience for history.11

Kate Patrick, who shared the editorship with Connell and others over the next few years, recalls that Connell argued strongly for the group approach to editing the MHJ, believing that ‘historians ought to work in teams like research scientists, not keep apart in cells of one, each working on his or her own preoccupations’.12 Patrick also remembers the journal as a way of sharing and making visible the work of undergraduates, who made up the core of contributors and editors in these issues.

Although there was a gap of a year between volumes six and seven, the MHJ continued appearing, in much the same format and with a variety of student editors until 1972. Notable contributors and editors during this period include Stuart Macintyre, Geoffrey Blainey, A. G. Serle, Max Charlesworth, Geoffrey Bolton and John Lack. In volume seven, Kathleen Fitzpatrick published her W. E. Hearn Historical Lecture on ‘Ernest Scott and the Melbourne School of History’. In it she noted that:

the proof of the higher level of competence now reached by graduates of the Melbourne History School is that if they wish to become professional historians themselves they no longer need, as the graduates of my time did, to take a second undergraduate course in a better equipped University.13

Her reminiscences of studying under Ernest Scott do not, however, suggest such a remote past:

in a discussion class for Honour students; we had not prepared the material adequately and were unable to discuss. After our feeble flow had dried up he sat with us in utter silence, for five minutes that seemed like five hours; then he rose, flung at us the memorable words – ‘All silent, and all Damned’, and departed, leaving us in dismay.14

In 1970 J. C. Hambly and I. J. Webb prematurely celebrated the MHJ’s tenth birthday (it was only the ninth edition). Their editorial speculated on two questions: “Has it been worthwhile?” Have we achieved any of our initial objectives?”.15 While acknowledging that the journal had gone into print and arguing that it had achieved an international reputation as its first editors had hoped, Hambly and Webb complained of a lack of undergraduate work. Only two of the nine contributions to this edition were from undergraduates, and Hambly and Webb called for more undergraduates to come forward and submit their work for publication. Unfortunately the next volume, published in 1971, included only one contribution from an undergraduate student. This volume was
the first in which a number of the authors were identified as undertaking 'postgraduate' studies. Volume eleven (1972) was the thinnest volume of MHJ to be published, containing only four articles and a list of recently submitted honours theses. The editors did not write an editorial or foreword, and the status of the contributors was not given. It would be another five years before volume twelve would appear, with noticeable differences to its predecessors.

In 1977 the nine editors of volume twelve admitted that they found it difficult to agree on editorial policy, and their editorial reflected this lack of coherence. It took the form of three short pieces which 'cover[ed] the spectrum of thought' guiding editorial policy. The authors of the first section of the editorial felt that the journal should reflect the 'new concept of the place of teaching history' in which students will have a role in planning their own courses. The journal's role would be to reflect students' increased awareness of the historical process and 'communicate the developments of a characteristically Melbournian historiography'. A second group of editors thought that the journal should be a forum through which otherwise intellectually isolated history students could work together and discuss their writing: 'If this journal helps people start to find out what others are doing, thinking, feeling concerned about, then it will have been a success!!'. They also felt the journal should not be seen as a product of the 'Melbourne History School': 'rather, it contains a range of different methods of doing history, and of different ideas of what history is'. The third piece emphasised the editorial 'non-policy', and also argued that:

To align the M.H.J. with the peculiar historiography of the Melbourne University History Department is a dubious aim. Even if this "historiography" were readily identifiable, our purpose is neither to become a mouthpiece for this department nor to stand in opposition to it. Instead, we have here a collection of interesting articles not noticeably interrelated but which individually represent a number of ways of studying teaching and writing history in Melbourne.

The lack of editorial unity may or may not have been to blame, but the next volume of the MHJ did not appear until 1981 when it took on yet another incarnation. According to David Goodman, one of the four editors, volume thirteen took shape as a result of informal postgraduate lunchtime meetings in a room in which boxes of old MHJs were kept in a corner. After discovering the subscription list, which showed that several Australian and international libraries still had standing orders for the journal, and after reading through some past issues, the group decided to revive it. Although it seems there had always been a problem with the number of contributions from undergraduates, and therefore an increasing postgraduate contribution in previous issues, volume thirteen marked a conscious effort to shape the journal into the forum for postgraduate publication that it is today. The editors of volume thirteen clearly felt that postgraduates had the motivation and the reasons to establish something of their own within the department. As stated in the editorial of volume thirteen:
Postgraduate students, lacking formal classes or any constant need to write, may easily find themselves separating those two closely integrated activities of research and presentation. This journal offers a forum for the constant need of all students to enter the conversations about their discipline.21

The journal’s change in emphasis was also no doubt the result of the growing postgraduate population and the subsequent demand for a forum in which ideas could be debated and discussed, including some assessment of the work of University of Melbourne historians. In contrast to their predecessors, the editors noted that ‘there has been a conscious focus, particularly in the reviews, on the work of the Melbourne History School. The M.H.J. seems well-situated for such a commentary’.22

Virtually the same editorial team continued producing MHJ until 1984, remaining faithful to both the ‘Melbournian’ approach and to the spirit of discussion, volume sixteen consisting mainly of articles which grew out of a 1984 reading group. In 1985 the journal was based largely upon papers given at the History Institute of Victoria’s postgraduate conference.

After not appearing in 1986, MHJ made yet another reappearance in 1987: ‘We hope that the ‘return’ of the MHJ will be greeted with enthusiasm by those for whom it is chiefly instituted — the postgraduate students’.23 This new group of editors saw MHJ as a validation of a postgraduate experience which included funding cuts, a lack of jobs and more generally, the ‘growing crisis’ that is still expanding a decade later. Volume eighteen was the first to include the directory of postgraduate research in Australian universities that has become a regular and important feature of subsequent issues. As MHJ became larger and glossier, successive editorial teams continued to emphasise a commitment to promoting postgraduate writing and teamwork, while at the same time adding innovations such as illustrations (1990), work by students from other universities (from 1988) and even poems (1995). Some of the more notable editors during this period included Lyndal Roper, Susan Janson, Kate Darian-Smith, and Sarah Ferber.

Elizabeth Freeman, a member of the editorial team which, with some changes, edited volumes twenty-two and twenty-three, remembers the difficulty of starting from scratch after all previous editors had departed, a problem which many MHJ editorial collectives must have had in common.24 After their experience with volume twenty-two, and a year’s break, the team made deliberate changes to their editorial methods to produce volume twenty-three, the ‘orange’ issue. The editors decided upon a theme and ran a small conference around it, giving the paper-givers no guarantee of publication. The theme of the conference, and subsequently the journal itself, was ‘Rediscovering the Political’, a theme which reflected the editors’ strong belief in the interdisciplinary nature of academic history, as did the inclusion of ‘political poetry’. The editors of volume twenty-four, perhaps the largest MHJ yet (in both actual size and number of articles), avoided a theme in order to concentrate on a ‘commitment to the publication of the best contributions of postgraduate students from around Australia’.25
MHJ has certainly acquired a significantly different focus since its beginnings thirty-six years ago. Indeed, if MHJ had not evolved into a postgraduate publication, reflecting the changes in the student population of both the department and university, it may well have sunk into oblivion. The 1980s saw it become a valuable part of postgraduate life in a number of ways, not only in promoting the work of postgraduates, but bringing them together in ways that make them an important part of the Department of History at University Melbourne. What is remarkable about the twenty-five volume history of MHJ is not the number of times it has managed to re-establish itself after lying dormant for long periods of time, but the number of times consecutive editions have appeared: 1961-1966, 1968-1972, 1981-1985, 1987-1993, and 1995 to the present. The defining aspect of the journal seems to be the sense of hopeful (and largely successful) groping for yet another group of students to take on the responsibility of editorship without the help of their predecessors. It is this succession of new beginnings by editorial groups, which have shaped the journal according to their own ‘visionary but noble’ ideals, that has made the Melbourne Historical Journal a tribute to the interest and dedication of those who have studied history at the University of Melbourne.

ENDNOTES

3 ibid., p. 6.
6 Personal communication, 20 February 1997.
8 Personal communication, 27 February 1997.
11 Personal communication, 20 February 1997.
12 Personal communication, 26 February, 1997.
14 Fitzpatrick, 'Ernest Scott', p. 4.
17 ibid., p. 2.
18 ibid., p. 3.
19 ibid., p. 3.
20 Personal communication, 10 February 1997.
22 ibid., p. 2.
24 Personal communication, 20 February 1997.
25 'Foreword', vol. 24, 1996.