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Illawarra Historical Society

(Affiliated with Royal Australian Historical Society)

WOLLONGONG

THE MONTHLY MEETING of Members will be held in the Illawarra Institute of Industrial Management Rooms, Central Chambers, corner Crown and Church streets, Wollongong on THURSDAY, AUGUST 2nd, 1945, at 8 p.m.

SPEAKER:

HON. T. D. MUTH

Vice-president and Fellow, Royal Australian Historical Society.

SUBJECT:

"HAMILTON HUME'S REWARD GRANT"

The overland journey of Hume and Hovell to Port Phillip in 1824 led to the settlement of the State now known as Victoria. The explorers each received a grant of 1200 acres.

Mr. Mutch will tell the story of Hume's grant and his narrative will include the strange stories of Frederick Jones of Mt. St. Thomas, of "Fisher's Ghost" and of Charles Rennett; the mystery surrounding the grant, and the cause of the feud between Hume and Hovell which lasted to their deaths.

The Monthly Meeting of the Society was held at Central Chambers, Wollongong, 5th July, 1945, the speaker being Mr. John Metcalfe, Principal Librarian, Public Library of N.S.W., and his address was entitled "The Local Historical Collection."

Mr. Metcalfe referred to "Settlers and Convicts" by an Emigrant Mechanic, Alexander Harris, published in London 1847, which described a journey on foot to Wollongong in the twenties. He gave this as an example of an historical source valuable in giving an unusual point of view, in this case that of the free working man or mechanic. He then spoke of the contribution which local history could make to more general history, if it were written against a background of general history and with reference to general values. He quoted from "Local History, how to gather it, write it and publish it," by D. D. Parker.

"Good local history is one of the most effective contributions that can be made to social science. Current problems, if studied only by the method of contemporary observation, lack perspective. The essential problems of social science do not always manifest themselves on large national canvases, nor do the fundamental processes which direct social evolution often originate in capitals and legislative bodies or in national associations. These problems and these processes generally emerge in localities, in communities, and their nature, operation and influence can be studied most effectively only there. No isolated problem or process can be truly understood without a complete and accurate picture of the complex which makes up the environment.

"The effective study of local history is an essential of social science. Without it, primary information of the utmost importance will be unobtainable and, to the degree of that omission, all results will be incomplete."
"Professional historians are critical of the product of non-professional study of local history, often justly so. Its defects, however, are due in part to defective training received in schools and in part to the failure to grasp the importance of widespread work in local history. The appearance of guides for the amateur local historian. The multiplication and growth of historical societies, and the establishment of higher standards for publication are remedying the first of these evils. The importance of more widespread study of local history needs emphasis. While it cannot be maintained that state, national and general history in the sum of local history, generalisations cannot safely be made without taking local developments into account. There is a necessity, then, for mass production of historical writing in which the participation of many people everywhere is required. One can never tell what locality and what circumstance, which has seemed not at all out of the ordinary, may assume a peculiar importance.

The materials of local history could be classified broadly as geographical covering discovery, topographical covering description, historical covering events, political, social, economic. Discovery included observation from outside, from the first charting of the coast to visitors' remarks such as those of Harris in his "Settlers and Convicts." The records of discovery could be collected in some cases in the originals but mostly in copies. Discovery merged into description.

"With an aerial survey as a basis for reference, photographs and other pictorial records of the whole district should be collected, with newspaper cuttings, auctioneers' descriptions, subdivision plans and so on. Biography was a good key to the historical record; the lives of commandants, police officers, magistrates, clerks and teachers who had been stationed in the district should be recorded, and those of local members of parliament. From all this biographical material an integrated and consecutive account of the district could be built up. The history of cultural institutions such as the schools of arts, and economic institutions such as industries, businesses, factories, should also be traced.

Any material which contributed to the record was valuable, and this should not be confused with material which only had associations, sometimes difficult to establish, such as bricks from old buildings. No printed or written material was valueless: newspapers, leaflets, labels how to vote cards, could all contribute to the record and it should be remembered that the present was the past of the future.

It was an important function of a local historical society to ensure the collection of historical material. It should see that material of wider interest went to the appropriate repository, the state archives and the Mitchell Library; it should see that there was an institution to ensure the preservation of local material locally, whatever the ups and downs of the society.

He referred to the example of Grafton where the collection of the local historical society is vested in the municipal council, and the Mayor is ex-officio president or patron of the society. As a result there is a fine collection of material housed in the council chambers in association with the municipal library. This, and the association of the state historical collection, the Mitchell Library, with the Public Library of New South Wales could well be studied. Room was needed and a paid and qualified custodian.

This was common practice in Great Britain. He referred to W. C. Berwick Sayers' Library local collections, London, 1939. All the municipal and shire libraries had local collections to which local historical societies contributed material, and the local public library was the recognised repository for manorial and other local records. As a municipal library was about to be established in Wollongong on a sound basis, under the new Library Act, the opportunity presented itself for an association and for collaboration which would enable the society to achieve one of its first and best functions, the collection and preservation of the materials of local history."
Another link too, is that at a sale of land in 1840, a certain Frederick Jones purchased a block of land at Coogee. He previously had a farm of 100 acres at Mount St. Thomas, Coniston, from 1828 to 1836. In his will he left £3,000 for the erection of St. Jude's Church, Randwick—though he never lived there. In this church there is a memorial to his mother. Also in the church are the Royal Arms though no one has yet found any explanation for their presence.

Mr. Mutch showed how research in one particular topic opens up many delightful side issues, and often they tended to lead the student astray. For instance, in looking up the history of Randwick-Coogee, he found that the first steeplechase finished at the broken bridge, near the old paper mill. Advertisements showed that this had been established by Fisher and Duncan in 1820. This Fisher, or rather his ghost, obtained world-wide notoriety.

Fisher had a prosperous farm at Campbelltown, when in 1836 he strangely disappeared. When a neighbour tried to dispose of his horse suspicion was aroused and a reward offered (£20 if dead, only £5 if alive!). Then Farmer John Farley, of Appin, rushed back to the hostelry to say he had seen Fisher's ghost sitting on a rail. Black trackers soon found the body and the neighbour, Worrall, was duly hung for the murder. The night before he was murdered, Fisher had been drinking at "The Plough," owned by Chas. Rennett. Here he had previously got into trouble for "pulling a knife" on a young native named Brooker, who had quarrelled with Rennett. During the 16 weeks he was awaiting trial, Worrall cared for his farm and probably developed the covetousness that led to the dreadful crime.

Further inquiries revealed that this Rennett had bought from Hamilton Hume the Reward Grant that had been given him for his expenses in making the journey to Port Phillip.

It had been assumed (by Dr. Watson and others) that this was at Numbaa in the Crookhaven district. Actually, in 1825, Rennett applied to the Colonial Secretary for permission to cut cedar on land adjoining his 1,200 acres at "Minnimerra," near Kiama, and was immediately asked how he acquired this land. On his replying that he had purchased it from Hume, the latter was asked what right he had to sell it. He replied that he was granted the land because of his expenses in connection with his exploration and sold the land to discharge his debts. He was then given formal permission to sell.

Some time later Rennett sold this land to Berry and Wollstoncraft, who exchanged it, through the Chief Secretary's Department for a virginal block adjoining their estate at "Coolongatta." Here is a gap! This is not the site marked on the map of the parish of Numbaa as "Alexander Berry Hume's Farm."

This, then, is the chain of research. From Randwick to Fredk. Jones (Coniston), St. Jude's Church, the steeplechase, the paper mill, Fisher's Ghost, Rennett's Land, Hamilton Hume's Reward Grant, Minnamurra River.

So we have been carried along some interesting by-paths of history. This history has romance and interest—just as the story of older lands, and is no whit inferior. But time is our enemy! What is needed is systematic research. A splendid hobby for happier men and women. Perhaps someone in Wollongong could make, from the early files of the newspapers, a card index of all the names of early residents, places, etc. There was an excellent field here for research. History does not come from books. It is the stuff from which the books are made.