

Q&A Interview

History Teaching in the Shoalhaven

Toni Hurley, HTANSW

In March 2022, I attended the HTANSW History High Achiever Awards evening held at the Chau Chak Wing Museum at Sydney University. This annual event celebrates the achievements of the top-ranking students in the Higher School Certificate History examinations and the HTANSW History Extension Essay competition. After the presentation of awards, I had the pleasure of meeting many of the students, their teachers and families. I was particularly keen to talk with Sarah Whitehouse and her teacher, David Nicholls, from Nowra Anglican College in the Shoalhaven. Sarah won the Alf Pickard Prize for First Place in the 2021 HTANSW History Extension Essay competition for her outstanding piece of original local history research about whaling in the Shoalhaven.¹

I was so impressed with Sarah's essay that I wanted to know more about her research and the approach to the Extension project that is taken by Nowra Anglican College. On visiting the college and speaking with David Nicholls and his three current Extension students, I learned that all had been encouraged to choose local or general Australian history research topics. The following are the projects that were being researched for 2022:

- **Emily Stein:** 'Evaluate the role of public history in the commemoration of military aviation disasters from the period 1940–1960'
- **Cameron Stanford-Smith:** 'How has the role of the Z-Special Forces Unit in the Pacific Allied victory been commemorated in Australia and incorporated into the Anzac narrative?'
- **Scarlett Wakelin:** 'The influence of journalism in the construction and delivery of history: a tale told using Dr William McBride'

David also told me more about his work in History Extension and other history being taught at the College, and students shared their experiences of the Extension course. Our discussions, outlined below, provide inspirational reflections on the value of the History Extension course; one that has been hugely successful since its introduction in 2000.

Questions to David Nicholls

Q: Can you tell me about your approach as a teacher to The History Extension Project?

I began teaching History Extension in 2019, so I'm still new to the course and the project. My predecessors, Michael Jones and Dr John McLellan were instrumental in setting it up. Michael Jones effectively taught the subject content and managed the project, but Dr McLellan was an extremely valuable asset in mentoring students during the project. This included guiding students to investigate events and issues that had remained largely untouched by public history in the Shoalhaven or the region. Topics for this included:

To what extent is the legacy of the HMAS Voyager being preserved and commemorated in the local Shoalhaven community?

Is the Australian Legislation that administers aircraft wrecks in Australia ethically adequate to administer historic wrecks in New South Wales? (focusing on a local wreck of a Fairy Firefly in Foxground).

My approach to the project has echoed those of my predecessors. While students can certainly investigate a range of topics including pertinent historiographical debates,



Figure 1. [left to right]: David Nicholls with his students, Scarlett Wakelin, Cameron Stanford-Smith and Emily Stein, source: Toni Hurley.

I emphasise the study of local history. This does not have to be limited to the immediate Shoalhaven area, though this is generally more convenient. It could be regional, state or national, as long as the student is able to travel to a site and/or interview people associated with the topic. This approach means that students have to engage with primary sources and original research. In terms of Sarah Whitehouse's project on whaling, there were very few journal articles and historical books for our particular area of Jervis Bay and the South Coast. So, like many historians, Sarah had to visit the sites to gain a greater appreciation of the geography. This included trips to Jervis Bay and a long family trip to Eden. This methodology is not always obvious in the body of the project, but it is fleshed out in full detail in the process log.

Students are encouraged to share pictures of the places they have visited. For example, Emily Stein had pictures from her underwater adventure diving the wreck of the Jervis Bay Fairy Firefly. Cameron Stanford's colourful journal had images of Z-Special's Krait docked outside the Sydney Maritime Museum and Scarlett Wakelin had clear evidence of her visit to the Crown Street Hospital where William McBride's Foundation 41 was set up. Other students have looked at the history and conservation of particular aircraft at The Historical Aircraft Restoration Society (HARS) in Albion Park. Research for this involved a tour of the Museum, interviews with volunteers who restored and maintain the aircraft, and investigating flight records to learn about the aircraft's history. Many of the aircraft at HARS have colourful backgrounds; those who volunteer to serve as maintenance personal or pilots have previous connections to the aircraft. In this sense, the students found that while the aircraft has its own history to tell, it has also become a symbol for shared memories and experiences, not only for those who

flew that plane, but for those who had flown that type of plane (e.g., The Grumman Tracker) at any time in the past. The Facebook group 'Friends of the Grumman Tracker' is an example of this.

Local History has its own challenges, however. Often, students are unaware of how to conduct effective field research or find it challenging to find information if a simple Google search offers little useful material. Students are therefore guided to local museums, where they must talk with curators, investigate archives, trawl through online newspapers and consult historians and local people. This approach broadens and develops students' research skills, forces them to think carefully about the right questions to ask to elicit the information they need, and builds their confidence by putting them out of their comfort zones. The skills learnt during the project are certainly ones that students will appreciate in their future lives.

Finally, the drafting process is often extensive. A core challenge for students writing the project is structure. Once students have completed their research, I discuss with them the most effective structure. For some, the structure may be a simple essay, others have benefited from framing their research in a report, with images, maps, diagrams, tables and statistics. This evidence could be integrated into the essay or be organised into an appendix at the end. Visually, I want students to provide clear evidence of their practical methodology and extensive research; the analysis and evaluation naturally flows from this.

To conclude, the project is a difficult, challenging, but highly rewarding experience. Not only do students end up producing fantastic pieces of largely original research, but the process

allows me to form meaningful connections with these amazing students. Local history is not only important for developing students' skills and abilities, but it also provides an opportunity to preserve stories that may otherwise be lost.



Figure 2. David and his students hard at work in the History Room at Nowra Anglican College, source: Toni Hurley.

Q. What else is happening in History at Nowra Anglican College?

The History faculty at Nowra Anglican College has a legacy of effective and entertaining learning activities for all year groups. Set up by Michael Jones and Dr McLellan, our present faculty, including Felicity Reynolds (HOD), Deidre Moxon, Samantha Mackay and I, aim to captivate students with the wonder of the past. We do this through various activities and assessments. The aim is to have at least one rich experience per year group. The major focus on Ancient Egypt in Year 7 is sealed off with our 'Night at the Museum' during which students must make a model of an Ancient Egypt artefact or scene. This is accompanied by a poster explaining the item (similar to that scene in a museum) and all projects are set up in a mini museum after school hours to allow parents, carers and friends to be involved in the learning experience. The students are also encouraged to dress up for this event. Samantha Mackay who is also passionate about Ancient History has recently developed mini archaeological experiences for students and Dr McLellan's Elective History class create a 'stratigraphy box' with various items placed at differing levels, each with its own story and context.

In Year 8 our focus is on Medieval Europe, with a specific emphasis on the story of Joan of Arc. For this assessment, students participate in 'Medieval Day' which involves a retrial of Joan of Arc. Teachers act as inquisitors, judges and the jovial herald, and students (who have researched a character associated with Joan of Arc's story) are challenged to 'come out the front' for questioning. Every student is required to present their witness statement and to create their own authentic costume. Before the interrogation begins, they are to swear an oath in French for the passionate French teacher, Yves Riou. This trial lasts for two periods and judgement is passed by Bishop Cauchon and Charles VII. Joan is retrospectively acquitted. The trial is followed by a

fantastic weapon display by James Adams, who never fails to capture the minds of these young teenagers.

Year 9 benefit from Shane Blackman's awesome World War I Experience, while Year 10, who previously travelled to the War Memorial, are planning on visiting Bomaderry Children's Home, which was home to thousands of young Aboriginal Children during the Stolen Generation in the period 1908–1980.

Another experience which runs in our elective course is entitled 'My Story Matters', involving a small number of students pairing up with residents from a local nursing home to interview, write and present their life story. This is probably one of my favourites because the students have the opportunity to learn real life experiences from someone who has gone before them. Students develop deep bonds with these residents and many keep in touch long after the project. Tears and emotions flow at the presentation once the project is concluded. During the unit on Kokoda and the Pacific, students are taken down to Kangaroo Valley to climb the challenging 'McPhail's Trail'. At the summit we rest and brew tea. My aim is to take students to Kokoda in the near distant future, but this experience at least gives them a taste of the challenges faced by Australians during World War II.

Finally, Elective History students can engage in a field study of the S.S. Merimbula in Currarong. Prior to the trip, the students attend the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney for a course in marine archaeology. After this, they survey the site of the wreck at Currarong, photograph and document artefacts from the wreck in the township (most are at the local bowling club) and visit the Nowra Museum which has its own collection and display of the ship. Elective History is therefore a valuable opportunity for students to learn something completely different from the regular history syllabus; its focus is practical to demonstrate that history is more than pages in a book or videos on YouTube.

History is exciting, it is all around us and it always has a fantastic story to tell. Having only taught the subject for nine years, I realise I still have a lot to learn and refine. I hope these ideas and approaches have been enlightening. If you would like to speak further about these projects and local history, then please feel free to contact me.

Questions to the students

Q. What have you learned and enjoyed most in the Extension History course? What have been the greatest challenges?

Emily Stein: I liked that the course, unlike Modern History, does not have a lot of structured content. It left more room for discussions and debates. The content is also quite interesting and differs again from the Modern course in that it is based on deeper historiographical issues and causation/construction of history rather than the events in history. It also complements the Modern course as, with the skills

you develop in extension, you can effectively analyse the construction of the events and the historians behind them.

At the start of the major work, writing a 2500-word essay on a thesis constructed by me was daunting. Being able to complete it allowed me to realise what I could do. Spending a year on the same question also allowed a very in-depth analysis of it and, being able to meet people that know so much about the subject was really eye-opening, as was going through archival documents and visiting crash sites: namely diving the Fairey Firefly in Jervis Bay.

Cameron Stanford-Smith: Throughout the process of completing my extension assignment and course, I have enjoyed learning about the multilateral nature of history and how it is universal. Everyone is entitled to know the history of their culture and values that in turn allows them to feel a sense of pride in who they are. This can be shown through our study of the early historians such as Herodotus who made history accessible to everyone (including peasants) in an entertaining and informal way. However, we discussed the value of this history, as Herodotus may have been tempted to over-exaggerate and fabricate stories to engage his audience.

Although this course has been enjoyable it has been extremely challenging in its complexity and workload. As an extension class, all essays are expected to be highly formal and sophisticated. There is also the additional challenge of time because we only meet once a week. My extension assignment was very enjoyable as it allowed me to do my own primary research including contacting authors and visiting museums and memorials. This process has also allowed me to gain extra knowledge on how to complete my Society and Culture Personal Interest Project (PIP) due later in the year. My PIP is focusing on differing perspectives on vaccines in Australia which requires a lot of primary research. My

History Extension assignment has allowed me to detect bias and misleading information in primary sources to gain an accurate understanding.

Scarlett Wakelin: When articulating the value of the History Extension course, I use the analogy that if one makes the decision to not take the class, they are effectively choosing to view life through Newtonian mechanics, knowing full well that Einsteinian mechanics exists. For in daily life, a Newtonian approach is fine, because it favours a general understanding of quotidian moments, yet the truer, or purer, Einsteinian method elevates the way we view, and comprehend, the world in which we live. Like many of the humanity extension courses, the History one is grounded in philosophy: what some might call a person's ultimate guide to understanding humanity.

The design of the HSC History Extension course does perhaps facilitate the occurrence of a watershed, or an Archimedes' 'Eureka' moment for the student, yet its value is witnessed in its sustained development of provoking thought and encouraging the student to investigate the answer for themselves. The course follows the vast timeline of historiography, and through an analysis into the changing methods of how history is conducted, coupled with the content of ancient and modern texts, students are exposed to understanding how society has functioned, and will function. Discussions encompassing the role of context, the democratisation of history during the digital age, whether history is an art or science, the politicisation of history and so on, are intellectually liberating for a student, for the knowledge extends beyond the course.

The stories of history are what captivates nations. The stories of history can make and break perceptions. We should never underestimate the power history wields. ♦

¹ Sarah's winning essay was published as: 'Australia and its historical responsibility: comparing approaches to whaling in local communities', *Teaching History* 56, no. 1 (2022): 54-60.