# Whose Past? – Whose Present?

## Tourism and Local History

## Peter Macfie

In 1988 while working as historian for Port Arthur, I was fortunate to meet a group of twenty or so local people from the Tasman Peninsula who believed the Peninsula wasn't just Port Arthur - and that its post-convict history was as interesting as the earlier period. With the strong support of the local community (and council) our magazine, *The Tasman Peninsula Chronicle* grew from a first issue of 200 to 600 for the fifth and sixth issues. The first two issues were reprinted. The group's self-confidence and pride in the district strengthened and it now plans to open a history room at Nubeena. The magazine is keenly read and goes as far away as Queensland.

While the community put its history into words for the first time, at Port Art Historic Site, under the new Management Authority, the presentation of history for visitors and the promotion and handling of 170,000 people a year grew by trial and error into an art form.

For the first time Port Arthur became marketed and promoted in a direct way, and a toll-gate was put in place to pay for the forty or so staff. Promotion of the site's history was taken out of the hands of locals and heritage professionals of the previous Conservation Project and put in the hands of advertisers, as the site became more important than ever as a marketable commodity. The training of the guides for whom I was responsible, and the knowledge they accumulated, was also seen as a commodity. To attract visitors, new discoveries in historical research were eagerly grabbed by journalists, anxious for 'new copy', and promoted both nationally and overseas.

The contrast between the love and enthusiasm of the local history group, where locals talked and reminisced, and the pressures of a high profile historic site raises questions about our positions and responsibilities as keepers of the past and the threat to history from so-called 'heritage'.

Neil Cossons, Director of the London Science Museum, asks 'can truth survive the pressures of a disposable income and the power of the tourist industry? Both generate wealth but they challenge those who aspire to purvey the truth’[[1]](#footnote-1). What will our approach be? Speaking on the economics of truth, Cossons observes:

Our job as interpreters (historians and preservers) stems primarily from a range of qualitative values ... and manifest themselves from the consumers' point of view in terms of truths ... Some will say that truth will wither away when the user pays; a cheap thrill will be more tempting than authoritative interpretation based on sound scholarship.[[2]](#footnote-2)

As others have noted, there is a desperate need for passion in the interpretation of our history. 'Our history', Uzzell feels, 'is in danger from within - from the history industry itself, due to the abandonment or compromising on the values of stewardship, scholarship and the sense of identity wherein lies the true worth of heritage'.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Images of Tasmanian history are being created by advertising agencies and sold by state government promotion campaigns without any contribution from historians or local history societies. Yet the image being conveyed 'sells' an impression of the past which will have an impact on local communities, particularly in the expectations of tourists. A current report prepared for Tourism Tasmania highlighting the financial value of cultural tourism indicates that the promotion of the island as a cultural tourist destination is underway.

Cultural tourism can also contribute to the cultural vitality of local communities, by identifying, documenting, upgrading and promoting local cultural resources for their own enjoyment. In fact, it will be essential to involve them in the process of product development. Much of the cultural heritage of a region resides in the memories of its older residents or families and it is this input which makes it come alive.

Festivals or fairs related to the specific economic or cultural activities of a region are an excellent way of promoting both local and visitor enjoyment of a community's cultural resources.

Those experiences which are offered under the cultural tourism banner need to be selected on the basis that they are unique, have drawing power, can be managed in a way which is sustainable and can be provided with a high standard of interpretation.[[4]](#footnote-4)

History, it seems, 'is gradually being bent into something called heritage', where an image of the past becomes the reality, and the past becomes fixed and separate from us. One author argues that 'our cultural knowledge of the past and understanding of history is weakened at all levels from the universities to the primary schools '. No historical training is at present provided for people working in the heritage field, including park rangers and guides at historic sites or travel agents - though moves to establish a course in Public History are currently being pursued. While primary, secondary and tertiary curricula have, in the main, been neglecting Tasmanian history, membership of genealogical societies and local history groups has grown rapidly.

Once history has received the 'high gloss of presentation' from the new breed of 'heritage managers' who succeed in presenting a curiously unified image there is no 'change, conflict and clashes of interest are neutralised' and there are no winners and losers.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The attraction of tourism for groups involved in local history and museums is the possibility of receiving some funding for a history room and the advantage of keeping visitors overnight in local accommodation, a point considered very favourably by local councils and businesses. But how are we to guarantee we don't lose our integrity and enthusiasm if our local history is to become a pawn in the tourism game?

The danger is we are losing what we revere in Tasmania, while still trying to come to terms with and unravel the past and our own attitudes to it. We are being pressured to grasp a gimmick here and a yarn there to draw more and more tourists, but there is a great danger we will swamp the goose that lays the golden egg. As unemployment and financial pressures push Australians to seek meaning from the past, there is a danger that the past will be ransacked instead. In the search for family roots extra strain on heritage resources is caused by tourist promoters and governments increasing the number of visitors who invade the locals' back-yard. The small-scale image of Tasmania, where people have time to talk to strangers, is replaced by the concentrated effort to cope with fewer 'buyers' yet more 'lookers and touchers' (as many non-paying tourists are known) - seen by locals as not worth talking to.

With limited funds, time and resources, historical societies and museums (and occasionally the university) portray a version of Tasmania's past to the community. Meanwhile, the tourist industry, via the media, is promoting a set view of what Tasmanian history is all about. This may be seen in posters and promotional material produced for marketing by Tourism Tasmania. All current posters and brochure photos are devoid of people - pretty pictures. ·'Naturally Tasmanian' says the caption to a view of the penitentiary at Port Arthur, the erection of which was a most un-natural act! Until recently the Tassie Devil, complete with ball and chain, snarled, 'You Want History?’

Who is responsible for this portrayal? A number of bodies - government, commercial and voluntary - interact to present the public face of history. The main co-ordinator is the state government's Tourism Tasmania, though overseas promotion is co-ordinated by the Australian Tourist Commission based in Sydney. Both bodies use in-house and freelance journalists, particularly travel writers. The journalists have their own organisations (such as the Pacific Travel Writers Association) and hold regular regional conferences where they are wined and dined by tourist departments as their columns offer free promotion of tourist destinations.

Tourism Tasmania works with local tourist associations to push for new attractions to draw visitors to stay (and spend) in a particular locality. Local tourist operators are organised into five regional bodies. Tourism Tasmania meets regularly with these groups. Divided into three sections (marketing, retail and wholesale), the department analyses trends in tourism - 'products' in industry parlance - and promotes (markets) them accordingly. The packaging of tours is organised by the product section based in Launceston. Publicity is organised through Marketing-International. The Australian Tourism Commission plans and executes international promotion of Australian 'attractions'. (Port Arthur has been filmed for this body, and a semi-accurate version of the site's history sent overseas.) A regular Tasmanian newsletter is sent interstate and overseas to promote new ideas and ventures.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The push toward cultural tourism will mean museums, historical societies and professionals will be in greater demand, and under greater pressure. At present these societies - and local communities - are passive receivers of the tourist influx. The cultural tourist offers much potential to these groups. Only the Colonial Accommodation Group is a ready user of the publicity machine offered by Tourism Tasmania. The recent success of the sixth Australian Genealogical Congress in Launceston gave an indication of the level of interest in family history and also the economic benefits of cultural tourism. The congress was handled by a professional convention organiser, perhaps the first time this type of conference has been so organised.

If local history societies are to get involved in promotion, they need to decide what they want to say about our heritage - what services they will offer. Will copyright apply (to photos for example)? Will charges be made for access to the search room? Will access be given to private records?

How are local history societies to respond to these demands and what is their role? Apart from conserving records, photographs and memories, these societies can and should act as honest brokers, recording, interpreting and presenting history with a local face. But where should the emphasis lie? Surely the main object should be to document the community's history, to keep the soul of the district, which is after all what the visitors love about the island.

At present however, Tasmanian history is in danger of being hijacked by entrepreneurs from the more crass section of the so-called cultural tourist industry. The impact of tourism is permanently changing local communities and their historic buildings. Renovation leads to concrete in stables and ice-cream shops in the bars of old pubs. Local collections can too easily be selectively pillaged. Images presented by the media are not necessarily those which the local history group or descendants or even the local tourism industry wants. Furniture, documents and artefacts are leaving the state unrecorded.

Tasmania is in danger of presenting a series of 'quaint towns' which bear little difference from one another. Very little is made of the unique 'timber-towns' which post-date the convict era and say so much about the way we evolved as a community. Historical societies need to decide which aspects of their district are unique and, with continued research, to discover new and varied history for the sake of the district *first* and the visitor *second* - not the reverse. This is not to suggest that truths about the district should be brushed under the carpet.

In towns such as Richmond - despite the local tourist committee's claims of it being unchanged by tourism - the service function to the local community has been replaced by the tourist operators' needs, with the old locals feeling alienated and the village overcrowded with cars and visitors. The 'loss of local ownership or control' (and the need for a more professional approach) has been identified as a common problem when tourism becomes dominant over other traditional forms of employment.[[7]](#footnote-7) Traditional crafts which become mere tourist attractions, rather than necessities, become devalued in the eyes of the locals. If locals do not have a say in their district, then authenticity is threatened and tourism will suffer in the long term.[[8]](#footnote-8) Catering for tourists often leads to a neglect of facilities for locals, a problem noticed in the historic Victorian town of Beechworth by 1906 and similarly felt by Tasman Peninsula residents living outside Port Arthur.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Some towns, such as Ballarat and Bendigo, have been content to keep the district's history in one centre while outside the real world is allowed to fall into disrepair and old buildings are altered, demolished or clad with signs and brick-board. This has been the effect of Sovereign Hill, Ballarat, and the Folk Museum at Burnie. Other towns have become so ugly and the sense of the past so remote that brick walls have to be covered with large murals. The collecting together of items for an apple or wool industry or folk museum should not mean the neglect of the rest of the district's buildings and landscapes and family history. (The Ross district is a good example of a combination of the two.)

Government is reluctant to recognise the conflict which is seen potentially to interfere with the tourist bonanza. A recent (1989) report on tourism by the Commonwealth devoted only three pages to the issue, yet two-thirds of the submissions dealt with the problem.[[10]](#footnote-10) Such development tends to destabilise a community, with tourist businesses often subject to regular changes of ownership as investment requires the proprietor to acquire capital gain and then move on. Apart from the many tourists, locals stop trying to recognise familiar faces in the streets and behind the counter.

This wider role pre-supposes an active interest by the local history society in municipal and state government decisions affecting the district's history - whether school curricula, buildings, record collecting, oral history recording, town planning or road widening. After all, history is not just 'what we keep', it is also what is destroyed or neglected (whether old people, records or buildings) and these decisions are often taken out of the hands of locals, unless they make their voices heard. Are we going to be active historical societies or mere nostalgia societies, content to live with memories and photographs?

We should see our role as keepers of the past as a wide responsibility. Apart from anything else, bad planning decisions can result in the historic/tourist/financial value of a town or adjacent buildings being lowered in value. Such was the case when the Koonya Church Committee on Tasman Peninsula originally planned to replace its decayed weatherboards with aluminium. The Tasman Peninsula Historical Society's concern resulted in an offer of financial assistance and in the end a local craftsman replaced the old boards for free.

Not all issues will be agreed upon. The decision to appeal against the proposed road-house development in front of the small weatherboard Military Officers' Quarters at Eaglehawk Neck (the oldest timber military building in Australia), caused controversy within the Peninsula group. However, the effect of the organised lobbying finally 'persuaded' the government to acquire the cottage.

Historical societies will inevitably be asked by councils or private owners for comment on alterations or new proposals affecting large towns, timber villages and seaside resorts - all are part of the background history which we take for granted. The change of one building for the worse can spoil the appearance of a street.

How can the local community respond to tourism positively and not lose its identity? Overseas experience has seen the danger of communities swamped by central planning and too many visitors. One answer has been to provide courses to train local people to act as guides to interpret local history, thereby keeping the care and presentation in local hands and providing employment. The establishment of a local historical society which genuinely reflects the soul of the district (and not the biases of a few dominant personalities) is one way the variety and contrast of a community's past can be recorded for the locals and visitors alike. This has been one function of the guides at Port Arthur where an extra sense of empathy is provided by local staff to an historic area and has so far prevented over-exploitation of the site.

How does the evolution of Tasmanian historical societies compare to the rest of the country? Tasmania, it seems, got off to a slow start. Most small towns on the mainland boast an historical society, many established before World War II. In Tasmania, the 'convict cringe' made many ashamed to look too deeply at the past. Our first historical body was not started until 1951. (A similar effect has been noticed in Beechworth, which had the Kelly legend to divide the community.[[11]](#footnote-11)I Tasmania had the guilt of guards and prisoners to do the same.) Now thanks to family history and new patriotism, interest grows every year.

The growth of these bodies in Tasmania is mainly a post-1960 phenomenon. The first was the Tasmanian Historical Research Association, which (fittingly) convened this seminar. The number of new societies formed has grown from one in the 1950s to three in the 1960s, five in the 1970s, five in the 1980s, and two (so far) in the 1990s.

A brief survey using the community group data-base held by the State Library was conducted (special interest groups, such as the National Trust and militaria groups for example, were excluded). Committee members in eighteen of the groups were phoned for an all-too-brief poll. A number of older groups founded in the 1960s had folded on the death of founder-members in the 1970s, some to be revived by community committees (Channel, Furneaux). Others grew from older National Trust groups to an independent status (Bothwell, Evandale, Swansea). In some cases this had caused friction with older Trust members. The traditional National Trust reputation for concentrating on buildings, rather than the community and its local history, has caused alienation in some areas. Locals specifically refused to join one new group until assured there was no connection with the National Trust. This distrust possibly delayed the formation of historical societies, as was observed in Beechworth which was classified by the Trust, causing resentment as locals felt they were being made into a museum and their property devalued.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Several groups with a museum emphasis were members of the Museums Association of Australia (Channel, West Tamar, St Helens), which provides practical advice to members and holds regular seminars/ conventions locally and Australia-wide. Of the existing nineteen societies in Tasmania, ten have a history room/ museum while four others plan theirs. Only five have publications, and only four have periodicals - THRA (Hobart), Launceston, Tasman Peninsula and Circular Head. Most museums open on request and seven are open during the summer and/ or regular times.

Groups in less populated areas are more active in the wider district, offering a social outlet for members (Bruny Island, Tasman Peninsula, Bothwell). Nearly all organise historic walks. The Bruny Island Society has established permanent walks along the old slide tramway. Nearly all groups invited guest speakers at varying frequencies.

While most societies put money and effort into a museum or history room the Derby group, through the annual Derby River Derby, puts money into other community groups and towards the restoration of public buildings, including the Council Chambers and Hall, without being a distinct historical group itself.

The groups were also asked about their relationship with their local councils. The Peninsula group was fortunate (and apparently rare) in having the Warden as a (keen) member of its society. With a few exceptions, many councils are still 'getting off the ark' in understanding the importance of history and heritage, but changes are happening. The new Evandale Historical Society received help from its local council and a number of other societies also have rooms on council premises. The Hamilton Council used a National Estate grant of $10,000 to produce a history of the district, and has supported a new Hamilton Historical Society, mainly consisting of sympathetic tourist operators. Generally however, councils still don't consult historical societies except at anniversaries when photos or text for signs are needed.

The impact of the convict stain is very evident in the continued absence of historical societies in the old convict towns of the Midland Highway - Richmond, Ross, Campbell Town and Longford for example. (The sharp distinction between village and estate seems to account for this.)

Only THRA receives any form of (state) government funding. Although no specific funding exists for history societies as individual groups, societies can be joint applicants with councils, or museums such as the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery (Launceston), for National Estate grants.

Specialist advice and expertise can be had from a number of bodies involved with the heritage industry. These include the Professional Historians Association, Australian Museums Association, Institute of Architects, Australian Archaeologists Association, Institution of Engineers, and Institute of Landscape Architects.

To ensure the long-term strength of local history groups, the formation of a Tasmanian Association of Historical Societies would give a united voice in matters such as funding, protection of documents, and history in school curricula. The formation of such a body to inform and liaise with groups and government departments, including Tourism Tasmania, would help overcome many of the pitfalls outlined above.

In the end, whatever approach or emphasis we adopt as Tasmanians interested in our own history, we should embrace tourism 'with cautious enthusiasm', but put much more effort into emphasising the cultural value of the assets that we have inherited and that we interpret - and stress above all that 'they are inalienable and irreplaceable'.[[13]](#footnote-13)

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