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American History in Oz

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When I was invited last spring to represent OAH at a national summit inaugurating the new U.S. Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, I had no idea I was going to Oz. Soon I discovered that Oz is the Australian nickname for their country derived from the nickname for Australians—Aussies, pronounced Ozzies down under.



Formwalt, Shane White, and Bill Chafe (left to right), enjoy a cup of coffee at morning tea in Sydney

Longtime OAH member Shane White of the University of Sydney invited former OAH President William H. Chafe to deliver one of four major addresses by American scholars at the national summit, and I was asked to attend as an active participant. The summit's theme was "Twenty-First-Century America: Reflections, Aspirations and Challenges." The other three speakers were from schools of public policy, business, and public affairs at Berkeley, Harvard, and Princeton. Bill Chafe was the only historian. Curiously, Bill's presentation, "America Then, America Now: Continuing Tensions in Who Americans Are and What We Believe," was saved for last. In his comments on the talk, University of Sydney historian Stephen Robertson asked why the history presentation came last. It should have been at the start of the conference to help everyone contextualize twenty-first-century American foreign and economic policy.

Historians in Sydney made the case that history has to

be central to the U.S. Studies Centre. We cannot examine the present and prepare for the future without a serious understanding of the past. The University of Sydney's History Department has a large Americanist contingent—one of the largest outside the U.S.—and it is in a good position to strengthen the new U.S. Studies Centre with the perspectives its historians can provide.

At the summit, an Australian professor introduced each American presenter and another Australian commented at the conclusion before opening up discussion with the audience. Morning and afternoon tea (at which I saw a lot of coffee) provided nice breaks. At receptions and dinners there were lots of opportunities to engage our Australian colleagues in discussion. On the first day of the two-day summit, the U.S. Studies Centre released the latest results of a survey of Australian Attitudes Towards the United States. In general, Australians have a favorable attitude towards the U.S., but that has declined since 2001. Their attitude towards the current U.S. president is decidedly negative. For the survey results, check out <<http://sydney.edu.au/us-studies/events/nationalsurvey.shtml>> .

Nearly two hundred people, ranging from politicians, diplomats (including U.S. Ambassador Robert D. McCallum, Jr.), and businessmen to academics and graduate students attended the national summit. The logistics of such an exercise (including getting the American visitors there) were ably managed by Meredith Hall of the University of Sydney. More information about the U.S. Studies Centre (endowed with \$25 million from the Australian government and almost as much again from American and Australian donors) can be found at its website: <<http://sydney.edu.au/us-studies>>.

One of the most interesting aspects of the summit was that it provided me an opportunity to visit with OAH members and others who practice American history half a world away. And that is an important point—it's a long way to Australia. For me it was an hour from Indianapolis to Chicago and then four hours to L.A. and finally thirteen hours to Sydney. When Shane White first talked to me about the trip last spring, he painted a gruesome picture of this endless flight. Fortunately, it was not nearly that bad, and I read a book on the way down and another on the way back. But it is a long flight. A few days before I left for Sydney, Shane emailed me, "You should think about us American historians out here when you're on that flight . . ." And that I did. To practice American history in Australia means frequent trips to the U.S. to visit the archives, to attend professional meetings, and to give visiting lectures. No one does this more than Shane himself who has already attended this year's AHA meeting and will be back next month for the OAH and in the fall for the Southern Historical Association meeting.

In Sydney, I experienced the diversity of the American history profession in Australia and New Zealand. I

met Aussies, Kiwis, and Americans who research, write, and teach American history in both Australia and New Zealand. The Americans range from Carroll Pursell, historian of technology who retired to Australia and is an adjunct at Macquarie University, to Ethan Blue (University of Western Australia, Perth) and Paul Taillon (University of Auckland, NZ). Australian Ian Bickerton (University of New South Wales) told me over dinner how he ended up at Kansas State University to pursue his Master's degree and attended the last annual meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association (MVHA) in Kansas City in April 1965. It was another Australian I met, Ian Tyrrell of the University of New South Wales, who last year provided the *Journal of American History* its centennial year article on the MVHA.

In addition to the group of Americanists at the University of Sydney, there are U.S. historians in several other Sydney universities (Macquarie University, University of New South Wales, and the University of Technology, Sydney). These historians comprise an informal U.S. history community that benefits from the kind of engagement their colleagues in larger U.S. universities experience. Then there are those like Ethan Blue who is just beginning his career as the only American history professor at the University of Western Australia in Perth. Ethan has been in Australia for two years and this was his first time in Sydney. I must have looked surprised when he mentioned that, so he explained that flying from Perth to Sydney was as long as a coast-to-coast flight in the U.S. In all of New Zealand, Paul Taillon told me, there were little more than a half-dozen American historians, so they work pretty much in isolation on their various campuses.

Is the OAH important for American historians in Australia? It is for someone like Shane White who rarely misses an annual meeting. And it is for four more of his colleagues (Stephen Garton, Stephen Robertson, Clare Corbould, and Ian Tyrrell) who will join him in presenting or presiding at sessions at the OAH annual meeting next month in New York. Chris Dixon, recently appointed to lead the cultural history project at the University of Queensland, expressed his appreciation of the OAH and his admiration of its concern about teaching. Like many of his colleagues, Chris has traveled frequently in the U.S. and loves the research and writing of history. "But, in the end," he said, "if I had to describe my job, I am a teacher."

At the summit in Sydney, we talked about ways the OAH might collaborate with the new U.S. Studies Centre. For nearly two decades now, OAH has been in the forefront of promoting the transnational dimensions of American history. Among the important ways to accomplish this has been to bring together U.S. historians from around the world. We have done this in scholarly forums in the *Journal of American History*, in the 1990s La Pietra conferences in Italy on internationalizing American history, and at occasional sessions at annual meetings. But there is much more to do. In Sydney, we discussed the possibility of

creating a program similar to the OAH-Japan project that sends OAH members to Japanese universities each year for two weeks. One of many possible ways to bring together American historians who practice around the globe would be to take advantage of technology and have joint U.S. history classes at an Australian and a U.S. university. And then at midsemester the Australian and American professors could switch classrooms and physically teach in the other country for a couple of weeks. If we truly understand and believe in the value of transnational approaches to researching and teaching U.S. history, we will come together to discuss and develop new and better ways to globalize our discipline more effectively.

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