

CENTRE FOR ECONOMIC HISTORY

RESEARCH SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

APRIL 2020, ISSUE 30



Australian
National
University

Friends of the ANU Centre for Economic History,

Welcome to this issue of the CEH newsletter. It includes a report on the APEBH conference held at the ANU in February. We also mark the exceptional times with some reflections on 1918/19 flu pandemic in Australia. Once again, thanks for your interest in the Centre for Economic History. We hope that you keep safe and well.

Tim Hatton, CEH Director

APEBH Conference Report, February 13-15

On behalf of the Economic History Society of Australia and New Zealand, the ANU Centre for Economic History hosted the annual Asia Pacific Economic and Business History conference on 12-14 February. This was the 15th edition of the conference, since its start at QUT in Brisbane in 2006.

The theme of the conference was “Impacts of Colonization on Indigenous Populations”. The organisation was in the capable hands of Martine Mariotti. The event was generously supported by the Research School of Economics (RSE) at the ANU.

The timing of the event in February turned out to be very fortunate. During January, bushfire-related air pollution and damage from a massive hailstorm limited access to Canberra. In March, the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic had the same effect.



Lionel Frost, President of the Economic History Society of Australia and New Zealand, Deborah Oxley, keynote speaker, and Martine Mariotti, conference organiser.

As if to celebrate that this was the 15th edition, the conference had two keynote speakers. Professor Deborah Oxley (Oxford University) delivered the society's Noel Butlin lecture, and Professor Richard H. Steckel (Ohio State University) delivered the RSE's Goldsmith public lecture.



Plenary speaker Rick Steckel

In line with the conference theme, Deb Oxley delivered an impressive lecture on the biological effects of colonisation in South Africa, based on a research project that harvested and collated heights of male prisoners during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The lecture demonstrated that economic growth in colonial South Africa had differential impacts on a racially segmented society. Deb concluded with a call to arms for economic historians to use their tools of the trade to measure the detrimental impact of colonialism.

Rick Steckel presented the outcomes of his projects on the long-term anthropometrics of skeletons under the title 'Very long-term trends in health on four continents: North America, South America, Europe and Asia'. The project is currently in the process of completing research on Asia. Rick encouraged anyone interested to download the data that the projects have

collated for the purpose of further analysis.

Four sessions discussed papers related to the theme of the conference, one on native America, and three on aspects of indigenous history in Australia. Together these sessions informed a panel session on 'indigenous perspectives on economic history and colonization'. During the session Matt Roskruge (Massey University), Tony Dreise (ANU) and Kerry Bodle (Griffith University) shared their perspectives on academia and economic history, leading up to a plenary discussion.



Panellists Kerry Bodle, Matt Roskruge and Tony Dreise

In all, about 40 papers were presented during parallel sessions. Apart from papers related to the conference theme, the greatest common denominator of the other papers appears to have been human heights and business history, although the theme of the conference echoed in some of these papers as well. For example, Kris Inwood (Guelph University) and Rick Steckel used heights of native Americans to trace changes in well-being during the 19th century.

A range of presentations discussed aspects of Australia's business history. For example, Josh Woodward (University of Western Australia) discussed his research into the role of Harold Clapp and the promotion of tourism in Australia's national parks in the early 20th century. Ann Collins



Launchers Richard Pomfret and John Wilson

(Federation University) presented her research into the development of the eucalypt wood-pulp and paper industry in Australia. Claire Wright (Macquarie University) discussed outcomes of her project on the interlocking directorships in Australian corporations during the 20th century. Two sessions comprised papers on the activities of multinational enterprises in Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and India, setting the scene for further comparative research in the context of the 'Anglosphere'.

The conference celebrated two happy occasions. John Wilson (University of South Australia) and Richard Pomfret (University of Adelaide) launched their latest book *Historical Perspectives on Sports Economics*. And during one of the sessions on business history, Simon Ville (Wollongong University) announced the start of an ARC-funded DP20 project on the contributions of inward foreign investment and the activities of multinational enterprises to economic growth in Australia during the 20th century.

For anyone who missed the event, the program is still available on the APEBH 2020 conference website. PvdE



Presenters' gallery. Clockwise from top left: Nico Meffe, Andrea Gaynor, Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, Pierre van der Eng, Katharine Hunt, Lyndall Ryan, Pam Sharpe and Christian Dippel.

Feature: Pierre van der Eng reflects on the impact in Australia of the 1918/19 flu pandemic

Australia and the rest of the world is increasingly affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Following news in late February of the number of virus-infected people growing in Australia, the ASX stock index dropped 37% in one month. During the Spanish flu, governments implemented policies to contain the virus and minimise the economic consequences, as governments are doing now. But the magnitude of currently announced economic stimulus measures around the world are highly likely to exceed that of equivalent measures during 1918-19, certainly in Australia.

The Spanish flu infected 2 million people in Australia and caused 15,000 deaths during 1919, when the pandemic was at its peak. This was respectively 37 and 0.28 percent of the population. But GDP increased by 1.7% during the 1918/19 fiscal year and 3.9% during 1919/20. In other words, Australia did not experience an economic recession during the 1919 pandemic. Not even a slow-down, because economic growth had been negative during the previous two years. In addition, the Australian stock market did not crash in 1919.

Maybe the absence of a recession in 1919 is not so strange. Wartime restrictions on the economy were withdrawn after the war ended in November 1918. And the Spanish flu spread first in Europe and North America, giving Australia time to prepare measures, for example a maritime quarantine, to curtail the spread of the flu as it worked itself towards Australia in the course of 1918. And thirdly, its impact was felt most severely for 6 months, during March-August 1919, and most people recovered relatively quickly and returned to work.



Nurses leaving Blackfriars Depot, Chippendale NSW, April 1919 (Wikimedia)

What lingered was the memories of anxiety and the sense of disaster that had been fuelled by drastic changes associated with the pandemic, such as prevalence of face masks in the streets, compulsory quarantining, shortages of hospital care and the creation of emergency medical care facilities.

Australia's 1919 experience with the Spanish flu suggests that, in terms of physical suffering and mortality, the impact of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic will get worse in Australia before it gets better. The 1919 experience does not suggest that the aggregate economic consequences of the



Kodak Australasia Pty Ltd, Staff using 'Inhalatorium', Abbotsford, 1919

pandemic will necessarily amount to an economic recession. The main reasons are that the 1919 pandemic did not paralyse the economy entirely and raged for just half of the year, after which economic activity resumed. Let us hope that Australian economy of 2020 will be equally resilient.

Centre for Economic History Discussion Paper Series

The CEH website hosts a discussion paper series on a variety of topics in economic history. Recent additions include the following:

- 2020-01 "The Second Convict Age: Explaining the Return of Mass Imprisonment in Australia," by Andrew Leigh
- 2020-02 "Estimating Long-Run Incarceration Rates for Australia, Canada, England & Wales, New Zealand and the United States," by Andrew Leigh

Centre affiliates and visitors are encouraged to submit working papers to the series. All papers are available at: <https://ideas.repec.org/s/auu/hpaper.html>

CEH news and working papers at: <https://www.rse.anu.edu.au/research/centres-projects/centre-for-economic-history/>

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