Tuesday 3 September 2013 3.00pm - 4.30pm

A Draper's Dozen? Connections, Courtships and Congregationalism in a Sydney Family, 1834-1917

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Theatrette, Sir Roland Wilson Building, Bld #120, McCoy Circuit, ANU, Canberra

This paper offers a preliminary exploration of the challenges of writing a history of Sydney from the perspective of a single, but sprawling, network of church and family. On April 30 1834 Joseph and Mary Thompson arrived in Sydney with ten of their twelve surviving children; their eldest son and daughter followed within a few years. Thompson had been a linen draper in Stilwell, London, and on his arrival in Sydney he opened a business in King Street. The family worshipped at the newly formed Independent Chapel in Pitt Street, where their presence en masse must have more than doubled the tiny congregation. In the years that followed, Joseph Thompson joined with John Fairfax, David Jones and Ambrose Foss in support of the larger Congregational Church that opened in Pitt St in 1846, in which all four were deacons. The next generation of Thompsons were soon firmly knitted into the fabric of Sydney life through business interests, mutual financial protection, shared work for church and community and an immensely tangled web of intermarriage. Committed to work 'for both worlds' – doing good while doing well – their passion for liberty and independence came tinged with a moral fervour that was consciously at odds with the general tone of Sydney, yet consciously committed to its improvement and growth.

I am fascinated by snobs and social climbers, scandals large and small, and the mysterious ways people lived, loved and learned in times past. Firmly wedded to the nineteenth century, I avidly pursue the 'small talk' of history in Australia and England, finding within private writing and the intimacies of social encounters (domestic and exotic) the political landscapes of gender and class, race and colonisation. I contribute to the cluster of research interest in 'Nation, Empire, Globe' an analysis of the social experience of colonisation in nineteenth-century Australia, particularly for women and particularly amongst elite groups. All these interests and more intersect in my research on the history of manners in Australia and in my writing on Jane, Lady Franklin (a snob of the first degree), whose bid to rescue her missing Arctic explorer husband Sir John Franklin in the mid-19th century made her a sentimental celebrity in England and across the Western world. My research in both these areas has been widely published both in Australia and overseas, and Arctic Romance: Lady Franklin and the Lost Polar Expedition will shortly be published by University of Toronto Press. Savage or Civilised? Manners in Colonial Australia was published by UNSW Press in 2010.

These research interests lead naturally to my matching obsession with the craft of history writing. What draws me to history is its unique combination of imaginative reconstruction and hard evidence, the way story telling is enriched by analysis, while analysis unfolds through story. Writing lies at the heart of the discipline of history, and in my teaching and still more in supervision I strive to build in students the confidence and skill to wield the curious power of words. I have received both the SUPRA 'Supervisor of the Year' award and the Vice-Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Higher Research Degree Supervision. I am one of the editors, with Richard White, of History Australia, the official journal of the Australian Historical Association.

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Convenors: Alastair MacLachlan & Ken Taylor

All welcome

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