Connections & Conversations

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Regional Archives Networking
*Do regions matter? Conceptualising regions within the State Records
NSW regional repositories network*

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This paper examines the way regions have been conceptualised to support the changing needs of key stakeholders, including government agencies and new state lobbyists. It then investigates the extent to which these conceptualisations have shaped the establishment and development of the NSW regional repositories network.

Wagga Wagga historian and archival collector Keith Swan (1916-1996) once recalled a conversation he had with 'a friend in Deniliquin' about the establishment of the now defunct Institute of Riverina Studies at the Wagga Wagga Teachers' College. Perhaps unexpectedly, Swan was told: 'I think your Institute is a fine idea; but, of course, Wagga Wagga is not in the Riverina; the Riverina is the salt-bush plains.' Feeling somewhat 'challenged' by this statement, Swan began work on conceptualising what he thought was the Riverina. The problem as he soon discovered was that while everyone knew there was *a* Riverina, not everyone could agree on the boundaries of *the* Riverina. With the help of his work colleagues, Swan delineated his own Riverina based on the administrative convenience of local government boundaries and historic perceptions of the region. Swan's Riverina

included some thirty one shires and two county council districts and, of course, the good city of Wagga Wagga![1]

Whether or not other people accepted Swan's Riverina is not important. What is important about this exercise is that it demonstrates quite nicely the perennial problem of conceptualising regions generally. Because regions do not adhere to any government boundaries, like municipalities or state government borders, they are difficult to define – although this has not stopped state governments from identifying and using regional divisions to facilitate administration. If we take Australia's largest bureaucracy as an example – the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education and Training – the state has been dissected into nine administrative regions, each of which is managed by a Regional Director.[2] However, the problem with administrative regions is that often they show little regard for historical boundaries. This may not come as a surprise when we consider how little regionalism and regional planning have figured in the development of Australia.[3]

As you may have gathered from the title of my paper, I am going to focus on regions and what they mean for regional archives in NSW, particularly with reference to Charles Sturt University Regional Archives (CSURA) and the University of New England and Regional Archives (UNERA). In complementing the papers of my two co-presenters and colleagues, my paper aims to throw light on the conceptualisation of regions in the context of the NSW regional repositories network. In order to tackle the question I have set myself – do regions matter? – I will need to define 'region' first, before looking at some of the ways the term has been conceptualised to support the needs of various stakeholders. The final part of my paper will consider the extent to which these conceptualisations have influenced the establishment of the NSW regional repositories network.

Much to my despair there are as many definitions of regions as there are boundaries to describe a region. 'At a most basic level', historian Malcolm Campbell defines a region as 'a spatial unit which possesses a distinctive identity'.[4] If only regions were that simple to define. For scholars like Chilla Bulbeck the term is open to

[1] Swan, Keith, 'The Riverina Where?', IRS *Riverina Research*, No. 1, October 1978, p. 1-2.
[2] http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/regions/index.php [accessed 20 September 2006]
[3] See Auster, Martin, 'Origins of the Australian regional and metropolitan planning movement, 1900-1940', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 21, November 1987, pp. 29-39.
[4] Campbell, Malcolm, 'What is a Region?', in *Locating Australia's Past: a practical guide to writing local history*. UNSW Press: Kensington, 1988, p. 43-44.

interpretation. At one level 'region' can describe a group of nations, like the South-East Asia region. At another, 'region' has also been used by the Commonwealth to refer to the States. Beyond this, the term can take on a different meaning depending on its scholarly use. For instance, sociologists use the term to refer to 'a community of shared interactions and beliefs'; political scientists use the term to refer to 'a single political unity'; while in the discipline of cultural and literary studies the term is used to denote 'the mechanisms which construct a local identity'.[5] Closer to our purposes, Professor of Geography James Macdonald Holmes defines a region in less abstract terms as 'an area so marked out and designed that its factors of soil and rainfall, agriculture and industry, food and labour supply, housing and public health, population and education, can be organised, administered and financed as if it were a single problem and catered for accordingly'.[6]

Traditionally, regions are thought of as areas dominated by agriculture because of the clear distinction between these areas and the metropolitan-state capital, yet as sociologist Ian Gray points out, regions can be both urban and rural, lying in either the city or the country. For instance, the western suburbs of Sydney and outer suburbs of Melbourne are often thought of as regions because of their economic and social distinctiveness in comparison with other parts of the city.[7] While some scholars continue to see regions as a dichotomy of the periphery/country/town and the metropolis/city/capital, political scientists like A. J. Brown prefer to view them more in terms of 'a network of self-defining territories'.[8] Yet, if we accept this 'centrifugal concept' of regions as self-defining entities, by what criteria do they define themselves and how do we accommodate conflicting historical versions of regional boundaries?

Take the Riverina as an example, which is one of the regions serviced by the NSW regional repository network. How would the people of the Riverina define their region when there appears to be at least two predominant historical views? One view sees it as encompassing the western pastoral plains of New South Wales with Deniliquin as

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[5] Bulbeck, Chilla, 'Regionalism' in James Walter (Ed.) *Australian Studies: a survey*. Oxford University Press: Melbourne, 1989, p. 71.
[6] Macdonald Homes, J., *The Murray Valley: a geographical reconnaissance of the Murray Valley and a new design for its regional organization*. Angus and Robertson: Sydney, 1948, p. 70.
[7] Gray, Ian, 'What is regionalism?', in Wayne Hudson and A. J. Brown (eds.) *Restructuring Australia*. The Federation Press: Leichhardt, 2004, p. 18.
[8] Bulbeck, op. cit., p. 83; Brown, A. J., 'Regionalism & reform: towards federation's 2nd century', *Reform*, Issue 78, 2001, p. 36.

the natural capital. This version was best summed up by travelling English novelist Anthony Trollope (1815-1882) as 'a wide, open, ugly pastoral district on which squatters prosper and grow rich'.[9] There is some question as to the northern limits of this region with one suggestion being the Queensland border.[10] The alternative version includes the pastoral plains and the land between the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers, extending to the south-west slopes, east of Wagga Wagga. The natural capital is a bone of contention between Wagga Wagga and Albury, with one playing second fiddle to the other depending on the historical period in question. This was the version that was favoured by Adelaide academic Gordon Buxton when he wrote his study *The Riverina 1861-1891* (MUP, 1967). However, Buxton did concede that 'every man defined his own Riverina to suit his own purpose'. Serious attempts to delineate the Riverina only emerged in the 1850s when 'disgruntled squatters' and 'Riverina citizens' proposed to establish their own colony in protest to the neglect by Sydney politicians.[11]

The problem with a study like Buxton's is that regions tend to be seen in formal terms. This was the observation that historian J. W. McCarty (1978) made in his paper on Australian regional history. McCarty believed that most historians have defined regions by their primary mode of production, such as pastoralism or mining, which distinguished them from neighbouring regions. In doing so historians have overlooked the relationship between town and hinterland within regions, and how regions have engaged with their capital city.[12] In light of McCarty's comments, Bulbeck points to Margaret Kiddle's (1961) study of the Western District of Victoria which stops at the South Australian border, and Buxton's *Riverina* which ends at the border of the Murray River, as classic examples of this oversight, even though in both cases the functional region extends beyond the geographical border. As Bulbeck continues, regions characterised by conflicting economic and political boundaries will produce different versions of the past, depending on the focus of the study. What we end up with, in effect, is a map of Australia with overlapping regions rather than one with discernible and tidy borders.[13]

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[9] Trollope, Anthony, *Australia*. University of Queensland Press: St. Lucia, 1967, p. 330.
[10] Frappell, Leighton, *Lords of the Saltbush Plains: frontier squatters and the pastoral independence movement 1856-1866*. Australian Scholarly Publishing: Melbourne, 2003.
[11] Buxton, Gordon, *The Riverina 1861-1891: an Australian regional study*. Melbourne University Press: Carlton, 1967, p. 3.
[12] McCarty, J. W., 'Australian regional history', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 70, April 1978, pp. 88-105.
[13] Bulbeck, op. cit., p. 75.

If we take to term outside academe for a moment and look at it in its everyday, lowest common denominated use – in this case, administering local Australian Rules football leagues – we soon discover that these guys have no idea either! If the current Riverina Football League boundary is any guide, the Riverina is restricted to the localities of Coolamon, Ganmain, Grong Grong, Matong, Griffith, Leeton, Whitton, Mangoplah, Cookadinia, Narrandera and the south-east suburbs of Wagga Wagga. If we include the neighbouring Farrer Football League, we can throw in the remaining clubs from Wagga Wagga and a number of satellite villages, as well as clubs in close proximity to those in the Riverina League, like Ardlethan, Cootamundra and Yerong Creek. Sadly for Keith Swan's friend, Deniliquin is not included in this football region. A quick glance of the Riverina boundaries of another football code, rugby league, reveals a little more representation with the inclusion of clubs from Wagga Wagga, the south-west slopes, Boorowa, Young and Albury.[14]

Just when I thought who on earth would use football boundaries to delineate regional sensibilities, I managed to turn up one study. In his paper titled 'Where the big men fly', Rodney Gillett uses Buxton's Riverina as a guide and concentrates on the Riverina and Farrer Football Leagues, particularly the centres of Wagga Wagga, Narrandera and Coolamon-Ganmain, to analyse the socio-economic composition of Riverina footballers and administrators from 1895 to 1914. In this entertaining read, Gillett maintains Australian or Victorian Rules football established an early foothold in the Riverina because of the economic domination of the colony of Victoria. Before the arrival of other football codes, like rugby, the recreational interests in the Riverina tended to mirror those of Melbourne rather than Sydney.[15] Interestingly, Gillett does not doubt Wagga Wagga's claim as the venue of the first football match in the Riverina. Described as 'unruly' and 'chaotic', the match was played on the Bank Holiday (1 August) in 1881 between rivals Wagga Wagga and Albury. Aside from the fact that Albury – having a longer association with the game – defeated Wagga four goals to one, Wagga Wagga was acknowledged as a part of the Riverina, while Albury was left out.

Beyond the local footy field, if there was a time when regional boundaries were seriously considered, it was during the hearings of the two New South Wales royal

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[14] http://www.aflnswact.com.au/ and http://www.crlnsw.com.au/index.cgi?sID=24 [accessed 28 September 2006]
[15] Gillett, Rodney, 'Where the big men fly: an early history of Australian football in the Riverina', *Sporting Traditions*, Vol. 4, No. 2, May 1988, pp. 162-175.

commissions on new states – the Cohen Royal Commission in 1924-25 and Nicholas Royal Commission in 1933-34. To give you some background, the Cohen Royal Commission was appointed originally to inquire into the grievances of the New England New State Movement, but extended to include those from other regions. Frustrated with the NSW Government for neglecting country electorates, the new staters pressed for the creation of new states not only in the north but also in the Riverina and Monaro regions. Much to the disappointment of the new staters, the Commission recommended that new states were 'neither practicable nor desirable', and proposed the extension of local government instead. Meanwhile, the re-emergence on new statism in reaction to the policies of Premier Jack Lang in the early 1930s culminated in the appointment a boundaries commission to investigate areas suitable as new states and the possibility of referenda in those areas. While the Commission endorsed the idea of new states for New England and Riverina along contentious boundaries, the new staters elected not to proceed with the referendum based on dwindling support and resources.[16]

What is particularly noteworthy about the NSW new state movements of the 1920s and 1930s is the way the boundary proposals changed to reflect the particular agendas of key players, including the royal commissioners. For instance, if we take a look at the way the New England new state proposal had changed, the western boundary at the time of Cohen Royal Commission extended beyond Bourke and excluded Newcastle, while the Nicholas boundary excluded Bourke, but included Newcastle. The decision to include the industrial city of Newcastle was based on the inquiry's recommendation that each new state included a balance of rural and manufacturing sectors. At the time the inclusion of Newcastle was frowned upon in new state circles, since some believed it would dominate the north, much like Sydney. Others speculated whether the people of Newcastle and the adjoining coalfields would be as sympathetic to new states if a referendum were held. In 1967,

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[16] Ellis, Ulrich, *New Australian States*. The Endeavour Press: Sydney, 1933; Harman, Grant, 'New state agitation in northern New South Wales, 1920-1929', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol. 63, Pt. 1, June 1977, pp. 26-39; Blacklow, Nancy, ''Riverina roused' representative support for the Riverina new state movements of the 1920s and 1930s', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society: Special Riverina Issue*, Vol. 80, Parts 3 & 4, December 1994, pp. 176-194; Nairn, Bede, *The 'Big Fella': Jack Lang and the Australian Labor Party 1891-1949*. Melbourne University Press: Carlton, 1995, p. 224; Moore, Andrew, *The Secret Army and the Premier: conservation paramilitary organisations in New South Wales 1930-32*. NSW University Press: Kensington, 1989.

these fears were finally realised when a majority in the New England region voted against the creation of a new state in the referendum.[17]

Notwithstanding the political undercurrents of new statism, regionalism and regional planning only received serious consideration in the 1940s and 1970s when state and federal Labor governments sought to decentralise administration and foster regional development. Regional planning was first theorised in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century, before taking stock in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s when it manifested as river basin planning under the guise of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Its popularity, particularly in Britain, was augmented after the Second World War when Civil Defence regions were established as a counter-measure should an attack on London disrupt the operation of administration and services across the country.[18] Meanwhile, in Australia, the first such moves in the direction of regional planning occurred after the election of the NSW McKell Government in 1941. Fulfilling an election promise of decentralisation, McKell appointed a Regional Boundaries Committee in 1943 to 'survey and delineate regions which might serve to promote rural development'.[19] The Committee recommended the subdivision of NSW into seventeen planning regions, with each exhibiting some good measure of economic and social unity as well as community of interest. The following years saw the establishment of a number Regional Development Committees and the opening of state government department regional offices.[20]

By the late-1960s the NSW government identified the need to re-conceptualise its administrative regions after some years of operating with a variety of regional divisions and conflicting administrative boundaries. In 1971, the government adopted nine common regions with the expectation that they be recognised by all state government departments to facilitate administration, regional development and the collection of statistical data.[21] Some scholars like John Power questioned the subdivision of historic regions like the Riverina into two regions (regions 5 and 6). In

[17] Farrell, John J., 'Opting Out and Opting In: secession and the new state movements', *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal*, No. 40, April 1997, pp. 139-148.
[18] Auster, op. cit.; Bland, F. A., 'A note on regionalism', *The Australian Geographer*, IV, 1944, p. 212-213.
[19] Bland, ibid., p. 213.
[20] Spearritt, Peter, 'Wagga Wagga and the Riverina: regionalism and government activity', in John Power and Helen Nelson (eds.) *The Regional Administrator in the Riverina: a set of working papers*. Canberra Series in Administrative Studies I. Canberra College of Advanced Education, 1976, p. 36.
[21] Serle, G. H., 'New South Wales' New Regions: some implications', *The Australian Geographer*, XII, 3, 1973, p. 197.

the face of a pending federal election in 1972, Power maintained that the decision was political. At the time, Power warned that should Albury assume status as a major growth centre (under a Whitlam Government) and Wagga Wagga continue as an administrate centre for a number of regional offices, there was nothing stopping either cities undermining the development of the other.[22]

Aside from the fact that regional planning never really established itself in Australia, the conceptualisation of regions did fulfil an important administrative role in NSW by assisting the deployment of responsibilities and staff to various regional centres. The same might be said of State Records NSW in relation to its regionalisation policy of loaning original state archives to regional communities. In setting up the NSW regional repositories network, the former Archives Authority of NSW opted for the common state survey and planning regions as delineated by the Department of Decentralisation and Development in 1971 (and amended 1972).[23] The preference for these administrative regions stands in marked contrast to what was practised at the Wisconsin State Historical Society's Area Research Centre, which had an early influence on the way the Archives Authority conceptualised the NSW regional repository system. Within the Wisconsin network, collecting regions were based on discernible territories and the more pragmatic concerns of storage availability to cater for the designated territory. Therefore, a region was defined in fairly flexible terms by its dominant characteristics and the amount of storage space a collecting centre could accommodate.[24]

By the time the NSW regional repositories system was established, the collection of regional archives was already underway in some host institutions. For instance, UNERA had been collecting records since the 1950s for academic use within its own region of Northern NSW, which meant 'the whole of the state north of the Hunter Valley'.[25] Considering the historic links between the greater New England region and

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[22] Bamberry, Geoff, 'The Riverina and regional administration', in IRS *Riverina Research*, No. 1, October 1978, p. 5. Peter Spearritt even suggested that pressures within the Department of Decentralisation and Development and from the Government Statistician influenced the decision. The Department of Decentralisation and Development was particularly sensitive of a previous report on selective decentralisation in the greater Riverina region. See Spearritt, op. cit., p. 46-47.

[23] Cross, D. J., 'Regionalisation of the State Archives: a policy review', Archives Authority of NSW, A.O. 90/80P, 1991, p. 4-5.

[24] Erney, R. A., 'Wisconsin's Area Research Centres', *American Archivist*, Vol. 29, No. 1, January 1966, p. 15.

[25] Buckley, Christopher, 'History of the University of New England Archives', *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal*, No. 40, July 1997, p. 120. I might also point out that while

new statism, and its resurgence in the 1960s, it is not surprising that this collecting region was conceptualised in such terms. In time, the collection of pastoral records over this expanse proved too much for the first full-time archivist, Ray McDonald, who suggested 'more manageable' boundaries along the lines of Pastures Protection District subdivisions.[26]

When the Riverina College of Advanced Education (now CSU) applied for regional repository status in 1978, the state survey and planning regions were well and truly ensconced. Under the tutelage of co-founder Keith Swan, the Riverina Archives was set up as a combined function regional repository similar to UNERA. The collecting region was tied to the regions of Murray (region 5) and Riverina (region 6), which equated roughly to Swan's conceptualisation of the historic or greater Riverina.[27] Similarly, the regional repositories at the universities of Newcastle and Wollongong and the public libraries at Newcastle and Broken Hill were established with the view that they service the state survey and planning regions in which their host institutions were a part. Time and space won't allow me to examine the historic conceptualisations of each of these regions, yet it is suffice to say early collecting was apparent in these regional repositories before they joined the NSW system, with much of it supporting the needs and academic and community stakeholders.[28]

If we look at the way both UNERA and CSURA were established, the historic conceptualisation of their respective regions was important in the sense that it defined the collecting boundaries for their progenitors. The New England region was conceptualised as the greater New England region that included the North Coast, while the Riverina region included both the Murray and Riverina regions, commonly referred to as the greater Riverina. In the case of New England, there was a strong sense of regionalism which gave impetus to the new state movement. This regionalism was also responsible for instigating archival collecting and documenting the greater New England region, although it must be said that there were other factors at work in the way collecting was carried out, which Don Boadle's paper will

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the conceptualisation of the New England region includes the North Coast (region 1), early efforts to collect in this region produced only duplicated records (apart from state archives).
[26] Ibid.; Boadle, D., 'Documenting 20th Century Rural and Regional Australia: archival acquisition and collection development in regional university archives and special collections', *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 29, No. 2, November 2001, p. 71.
[27] Swan, K. J. Draft letter to principal archivist Archives Authority, 13 July 1977, CSURA, RW1586.
[28] Boadle, D., 'Origins and development of the New South Wales regional repositories system', *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 23, No. 2, November 1995, pp. 274-288.

address shortly. In the Riverina, regionalism was never as strong as it was in New England. Despite the periodic emergence of new statism and the work of development leagues, regionalism in the Riverina was very much tied to the undertakings of key individuals. The Riverina new state movement itself stands as testament to this by the way its headquarters shifted from Deniliquin in the 1850s and 1860s, to Albury in the 1920s and Wagga Wagga in the 1930s, depending on where the main participants lived.[29]

This brings me to my own big question: do regions matter? The short answer is: not really! For the founders of UNERA and CSURA, the conceptualisation of the historical region was obviously important in terms of defining their collecting boundaries. Yet when we talk about regions in the context of the NSW regional repositories network, they are not that important. What was important for the Archives Authority at the time it was establishing the regional repositories system was the location and support of suitable host institutions that could house and make available local and regional records in the communities where they were created. It seemed the adoption of the common state survey and planning regions was the most efficient way of carrying this out. In actual fact, the regional repository system could have used any configuration of regional or geographic boundaries, as along as host institutions were available to support its successful operation.

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[29] Frappell, L. O., 'Independence or Annexation to Victoria? separationism in the Riverina in the 1850s and 1860s', *Victorian Historical Journal*, Vol. 65, No. 2, October 1994, pp. 113-129.