‘But no one can say he was hungry’

Memories and representations of Bonegilla Reception and Training Centre

Bruce Pennay

This article examines representations of the Bonegilla Reception and Training Centre and the arrival experiences of the non-British immigrants who were processed there between 1947 and 1971. In it I challenge what I see as a drift in scholarly conversations about post-war immigration towards emphasising new arrival discomfort and making harsh judgements about the way the migrant experience was structured. The article was stimulated by Nadia Postiglione’s “‘It was just horrible’: the food experiences of immigrants in 1950s Australia’. In continuing the conversation she initiated, I give attention to new arrival food experiences, for food is a key indicator of cultural transition and hospitality. The thrust of the article, however, is an extrapolation of Paula Hamilton’s observations on shifts in Australia’s memorial culture and developments in a ‘memory industry’. I worry about untangling conflicting memories and representations of place and times within living memory. I suggest that dystopian representations of migrant accommodation centres may fit an apologetic commemorative culture, but do not always tally with the evidence. This article is part of a long-term endeavour to try to develop nuanced social histories on which to base interpretation of the Bonegilla Migrant Experience heritage park. It starts with a discussion of some of the perils and advantages of writing history at and from a heritage place.

This article has been peer-reviewed.

Situated about twelve kilometres up the Murray River from Wodonga, the war-time Bonegilla Army Camp became the largest and longest-serving post-war immigrant reception centre. From 1947 to about 1953 it catered for displaced persons and from 1951 to 1971 for assisted migrants and refugee groups, such as Hungarians, Czechoslovaks and White Russians.
fleeing Cold War changes. Altogether about 310,000 people, drawn almost exclusively from non-British European countries, were processed at Bonegilla. It has become probably the best ‘remembered’ of the reception centres.1 In 2005 the Victorian Government funded new buildings to establish the Block 19 remnant as a commemorative centre and tourist venue. In 2007 it was placed on the National Heritage List.

That part of the story is simply told.2 Yet there are arguments about how the story is developed further and how the mute remnant buildings and the site are framed to ‘provoke interest and reflection’.3 Hopefully differences of opinion on the meaning of a heritage place might send historians scurrying to their sources and disputing the weighting they give different kinds of evidence. But a great deal of the argument seems to me to relate to different readings of the site’s contemporary resonance.

It is perilous to position oneself in a scholarly discussion as a historian working at and from a heritage site, particularly when that site has been placed on the National Heritage List. Colleagues warn that heritage historians risk being cast as apologists, trumpeting a triumphal, government-sanctioned narrative of nation-building.4 At Bonegilla, they risk being accused of developing patriotic narratives of a successful post-war immigration program that worked wonders for the Australian economy. They risk being charged with trying to authenticate a multicultural narrative and championing a ‘celebratory multiculturalism’.5 They risk disparagement for promoting the nation’s ‘generous welcome to newcomers’.6 They may be accused of being tourism oriented above all else.7

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2 I presented an early outline of this paper at the Food Traditions and Culinary Cultures Symposium at William Angliss Institute during the Melbourne Wine and Food Festival, 12 March 2011. I thank Alison Wishart and Paula Hamilton for their comments on a draft.


Such cautions are to be heeded, particularly in so far as heritage site based historians may be involved in advocacy to win attention and funding for sites. By definition National Heritage sites relate to ideas of nation, but in Australia interpretation and conservation funding bodies are generally supportive of projects built on critical reflection. Further, heritage historians have advantages with which to work: they have opportunities to develop insights from a close acquaintance with fabric and location, from engagement with visitors and from a large and constantly expanding memory bank. In their analysis of fabric and location, heritage historians slip easily from cries of ‘location, location, location’ to ‘context, context, context’. Heritage historians, like those working within teams in museums or in film-making, have no special privilege in determining presentation to attract or engage visitors. However, they can be expected to insist on negotiating meanings from different points of view, most commonly by incorporating multiple stories stretching to, through and from a site. Heritage historians can learn a great deal from what visitors bring to a site. Most visitors arrive with different expectations, but are generally open to surprises that challenge preconceptions.

Our charge at Bonegilla, if we have one, is to explain the significance of the site. Three points made within the National Heritage Listing indicate the kinds of direction our interpretation efforts have taken. First, there is a focus on the migrant experience: ‘the rudimentary barracks buildings ... demonstrate the basic conditions typical of migrant reception places ... [they] retain a strong sense of what migrant life would have been like’. Further, ‘Bonegilla and its associated oral and written records yield insights into post-war migration and refugee experiences’. Second, we look to the way the migrant experience was structured: Bonegilla ‘represents the role of Australia as a “host” nation’. It dealt with newcomers who were drawn from non-English-speaking European countries and consequently has close association with the immigration policy shift away from prioritising Anglo-Celtic sources. Third, we encourage a ‘participatory

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8 The Bonegilla Collection at Albury Library Museum contains over 20 sustained interviews; 357 personal history data base entries; over 500 short memory pieces and 700 photographs. Memory pieces quoted here are from that collection unless otherwise cited. Full names are given only where visitors have given explicit agreement to be quoted.


memorialisation’, for ‘Bonegilla holds powerful connections for many people’. We find former residents, our pilgrims, come to tell rather than be told, but we may be able to help them view their stories, or the stories of family members, in larger frames.\textsuperscript{11}

Stepping back a bit further, American historian John Bodnar suggests that public memorials are ‘useful to the present and the future’. Memorials may, for example, calm anxieties, eliminate indifference or promote exemplary patterns of behaviour.\textsuperscript{12} So the Bonegilla Migrant Experience commemorative centre may allay some present-day unease about absorbing people from diverse backgrounds as we edge towards a Big Australia. It may awake interest in or renew respect for those involved in peopling post-war Australia. It may be a reminder of the way the Second World War and the subsequent Cold War displaced civilian populations to the other side of the world. It may be a reminder of the impact of post-war re-organisation of the global labour market on hapless workers – or calculating labourers. Perhaps Bonegilla has warranted national notice as part of an officially initiated endeavour to develop a more inclusive narrative of nation, for the National Heritage List was almost contemporaneously expanded to include Myall Creek. Perhaps it is exemplary in raising questions about the roles of the nation and the community in reception and training that morph into modern day equivalents.

There will always be disagreements about which present-day purposes Bonegilla fills. It admits multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations. I know no way to resolve such disagreements in so far as they rest on readings of present-day needs and/or the moral suasion of those who make them. I do, however, seek to challenge the evidence base for dystopian approaches that have become more frequent.

Paula Hamilton argues that historical understandings are increasingly shaped in a memorial culture. Starting from the proposition that ‘the meaning of the twentieth century is in the grip of memory’, she critically examines the tangle of memory and history in public discourse about recent events and times. Counter-memories she welcomes as challenging the traditional narrative of the nation, but an over-reliance on memory may also ‘impede rather than enhance historical understanding’. She explains her concerns by focusing on representations of the recent


experience of indigenous people.\textsuperscript{13} Her concerns prompt a similar consideration of the representations of the experiences of post-war immigrants.

This article explores two of several issues that worry Hamilton about the place of memory in public debates about events in living memory and its effects on the historical imagination. First, she detects a tendency to adopt a ‘remembered victimhood’; and second, she identifies the problems related to challenging the authenticity of remembering.\textsuperscript{14}

A dark heritage

Following Hamilton, we might well argue that the arrangements made for the reception of post-war immigrants are commonly represented as one of our sorrowful pasts. Stories about Bonegilla are, then, extensions of the unhappy ways that Australians have gone about peopling this place. They sit beside shameful stories that provoked the Apology to the Stolen Generations, the Apology to Forgotten Australians and the ‘secret’ history of the White Australia policy as portrayed in the SBS TV series \textit{Immigration Nation}. At a ceremony to take possession of the World Youth Day Cross as it travelled through his diocese, the late Bishop of Sandhurst, Joe Grech (from Malta in 1971), waved towards Bonegilla and called for a public apology to post-war migrants: ‘We should say sorry because we didn’t know how to welcome them.’\textsuperscript{15} His notion of an apology has been expanded by the editor of \textit{Eureka Street}, Michael Mullins, to embrace all non Anglo-Saxon Australians.\textsuperscript{16} Preparing an art gallery exhibition, Domenico de Clario (Trieste 1956) arranged the memorabilia of the Bonegilla Collection as an ossuary, paying tribute to the sacrifice of the ‘Unknown Migrant’.\textsuperscript{17} For many, Glenda Sluga argued, Bonegilla was ‘a place of no hope’. It was and always will be a reminder of the outmoded notion of assimilation.\textsuperscript{18} Sandra Wills views Bonegilla as a forerunner of the miserable detention centres that house uninvited refugees; a place

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 147–149.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Border Mail}, 14 March 2008.
\textsuperscript{16} Michael Mullins ‘Non Anglo-Saxon Australians deserve an apology’, \textit{Eureka Street} 21 (3), February 2011.
\textsuperscript{17} ‘Ossuary’, Albury Regional Art Gallery, 2008.
\textsuperscript{18} Glenda Sluga \textit{Bonegilla: ‘A Place of No Hope’}, Parkville: History Department, University of Melbourne 1988, x–xii.
of pain and shame from which we are to draw a ‘productive sadness’.\(^{19}\) Anna Haebich labels Bonegilla as the ‘most notorious’ of the reception centres.\(^{20}\) Eric Richards describes the conditions as ‘primitive and congested’, leading to ‘considerable alienation’. Many residents, he adds darkly, were ‘permanently marked’ by Bonegilla.\(^{21}\) Plainly all suggest post-war Australians were not good at taking in strangers at Bonegilla. There was no warm national cuddle. Bonegilla belongs in the genre of heritage noir.

Bonegilla was set ‘in the middle of nowhere’, and the military-like arrangements for housing and feeding residents were not to everyone’s liking. The accommodation was basic: communal living entailed sharing bathrooms, toilets and eating places with changing sets of strangers. Most blocks, or clusters of huts, had deep-pit latrines. The sleeping and eating quarters were sparsely furnished tin huts, hot in summer and cold in winter. Indeed, July proved to be the cruelest month at Bonegilla: there was a health scandal in July 1949, and riots in July 1952 and July 1961. Bonegilla never really escaped its origins as an army camp. The army was responsible for catering, transport and security services until 1949 and remained in charge of supply until 1950. Army units were co-located on the site until 1949 and again after 1965. The centre was run and fed on military lines. Like the Western Australian migrant centres which Nonja Peters describes, Bonegilla was ‘definitely not the Ritz’.\(^{22}\)

The modesty of the makeshift arrangements was summarised in the report of a \textit{Border Morning Mail} investigation into allegations that the government was giving migrants an unfair allocation of housing and other resources in 1949.\(^{23}\) The Director, Major Kershaw, told the newspaper that conditions were ‘not all that could be expected’, but with the large numbers to be housed it was just not possible to provide better accommodation. Taxpayers were reassured about the thrift of the operations: the accommodation was ‘only reasonably comfortable’; the food ‘though plain was nutritious and plentiful’; there was neither luxury nor squalor; all expenditure was carefully monitored. Moreover, the refugees were only at Bonegilla for about three weeks.\(^{24}\)

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19 Wills ‘Between the hostel and the detention centre’, 276.
24 \textit{Border Morning Mail (BMM)}, 23 June 1949.
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Bonegilla food experiences

Nadia Postiglione contends that the food experiences at migration accommodation centres were important to post-war new arrivals. Following through migrant complaints, she draws a picture of ‘food alienation’ and ‘food dispossession’ that she suggests reflected poorly on the way the migration experience was organised. For Anna Haebich, resident complaints seemed to centre on the separation of families, ‘along with the canteen food which was distinctly Australian in a clear expression of the message of assimilation’. Glenda Sluga found that for the residents ‘the food was a nightmare’. Richard Bosworth contends that his account of the 1952 riot should not prompt ‘unthinking pride’ in the post-war immigration program. A cold mutton chop, covered with a sauce ‘absolutely unknown in Italy’ was no solace for an unemployed Italian worker. The provision of food was plainly a key indicator of hospitality, containing implicit messages of host nation attitudes to the newly arrived.

Food, however, is always viewed differently by the fed and by the provider. The official records show that reception centre food loomed large in the minds of those charged with receiving immigrants. Food was a major cost. The kitchen and messes occupied the biggest buildings. The supply of food and preparation of meals employed the largest number of reception centre personnel. As government enterprises, the reception centres were subject to policy directives, inspections and audits. Files at the National Australian Archives contain details of ration supplies, stoves and menus, on which Nadia Postiglione has based a careful analysis of the ingredients used and the ways the food was cooked and presented in the early 1950s.

Not unexpectedly, there were regular food patterns that helped simplify supply and preparation. Supplies matched army rations. Initially there was a common week-long menu that established a basic pattern of cooked breakfast with a morning-only choice of coffee or tea. Lunches always included a sweet. Cut lunches were provided for school children and for those who had work outside the centre. Dinner always included soup; the mains consisted of meat and three vegetables. There was a choice of fish on Fridays. Mutton appeared regularly. Pork appeared only as ham or...

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26 Haebich Spinning the Dream, 171.
27 Sluga Bonegilla, 36–42.
bacon. There was no chicken. Potatoes were served for at least one meal each day. Seconds were usually available on request. Newcomers would have quickly become accustomed to daily and weekly food rhythms.\textsuperscript{29} The rhythms were broken with special fare on Christmas Day and ice cream for the children on Australia Day. To celebrate the Coronation in 1953, children were provided with ice cream, fruit, frankfurts and pies as well as a linen flag and a medal. Such largesse required official encouragement and approval.\textsuperscript{30} In keeping with a government department reliant on the public purse, immigration authorities did careful calculations. It cost 2 shillings and 9 pence a day to feed each newcomer or £360,000 for the whole of Bonegilla each year.\textsuperscript{31} Nonja Peters notes the fine calculation at the Northam reception centre in Western Australia where at the first

\textbf{Figure 1. Staff were proud that they could sit new arrivals such as this Dutch group to a hot welcoming meal within 65 minutes of arrival, even if it be as late as 10pm}

The photograph shows the migrants queued cafeteria style. The crowded ‘unimproved’ mess hut has bare light bulbs, unlined corrugated iron walls, bare-board trestle tables and unbacked seating benches. Ambience must have shaped perceptions of the food.

A12111, 55/22/78, NAA.

\textsuperscript{29} For detailed menus see ‘Inspection reports’ A445, 220/14/25; ‘DPs’ A1831, 1947/693 NAA; and Bosworth, 568.

\textsuperscript{30} ‘Christmas and Australia Day’ A2567, 1960/67 and ‘Inspection reports’ A445, 220/14/25 NAA.

\textsuperscript{31} Schroeder to Department Secretary, 11 May 1950, ‘Food supplies’A4344, 1949/3/25374 NAA.
meal on arrival each resident ate, on average, 454 grams (about half a loaf) of bread. Each also got through half a pot of jam a day.32

I suggest that the official records prompt some sympathy for on-the-spot managers wrestling with the task of dealing with and catering for large numbers. The remnant kitchen, messes and food storage and preparation rooms indicate catering was on an industrial scale. Block 19 was one of over twenty blocks, many of them with their own kitchen, each catering for about three or four hundred people eating in two messes or dining halls. In 1949 there were eight kitchens operating. In 1953 there were 146 cooks and kitchen hands on the staff. Directors complained that good cooks were difficult to recruit and to keep: they could easily get well paid jobs outside the centre. The cooks, in turn, complained that there was a rapid turnover in kitchen staff, so they had no trained and reliable assistants.33

Figure 2. Dutch comedian, Max Tailleur, admires Bonegilla cuisine in its industrial-scaled kitchens
A12111, 1/1959/23/25, NAA.

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32 Peters Milk and Honey, 146.
33 Inspection reports, 1953, A445, 220/14/25, NAA; Correspondence re turnover of staff, May 1962, A2567, 1962/1/3, NAA. Peters, too, is impressed with the industrial scale of the catering operations, Peters Milk and Honey, 146.
A great deal of food was required to fuel 6000 people three times each day for seven days a week. Up to three tonnes of meat and a semi-trailer of milk were delivered each day. Auditors worried over some of the long-standing arrangements that some army supply officers had put in place with local suppliers. They checked for short-weight bread, watered-down milk and inferior meat carcases. They even worried about the disposal of surplus food and the corruption that might be involved in generosity to the pig-man.

Officers on the ground expressed misgivings about other shortcomings. So, for example, inspection report files indicate dissatisfaction with the hygiene standards at the time of a health scandal in 1949. Correspondence files show officials in 1951 anticipating difficulties related to the proposed use of inadequate facilities for the soon-to-arrive Italians, especially the ‘antiquated’ messes. There are requests from catering officers for jelly crystals, essences and sauces ‘to make the food less monotonous’. Some within the bureaucracies did identify problems and try, within constraints, to address them. Their failures underline system failure. They also indicate careful, if not caring, people.

Accommodation pressures varied from time to time. As more ships became available in 1949 and 1950, the number of arrivals increased markedly. The Department of Immigration came under pressure to provide more accommodation and the Department of Labour and National Service to provide more jobs. There were frequent, even feverish, calculations and recalculations of the numbers mustered ready to leave Europe, the capacity of the ships, their dates of arrival and the number of beds in migrant accommodation centres. The situation was made even more difficult by a coal strike disrupting railway transport. Additional reception centres were opened and Bonegilla was expanded so that it was able to take 7700 with an additional 1600 in tents if required. Instruction huts were given over to accommodating new arrivals. A teleprinter was

34 Kershaw report, no date, 1–2, ‘Food supplies’ A434, 1949/3/25374, NAA.
37 Inspection report, 7 August 1951, A445, 220/14/25, NAA.
38 Audit report, 9 May 1952, A1832, 1947/693, NAA.
39 Calculations see, NAA ‘Migrant accommodation’ A445, 219/1/6; jobs see ‘Complaints of DPs’ SP1048/6, C8/1/121, ‘CES reports’ SP193/1, T6725; coal strike see ‘DP employment’ A434, 1950/3/13; ‘DPs with qualifications’ SP193/1, T35522; impact on Bonegilla see ‘Migrant accommodation’ A445, 219/1/1/ and Lois Carrington A Real Situation: The Story of Adult Migrant Education in Australia 1947 to 1970, Canberra: private publication 1997, 41, 54.
installed to expedite the dispatch of workers to workplaces. Up to 40 employment officers were kept busy processing and dispatching as many as 100 people per day during some parts of 1950. In one period of 24 hours, 3000 left and another 5000 arrived.

Sluga caught a sense of the pressure on staff from Pat Smith, a Bonegilla administrator:

The quicker we could get people, whether workers or dependants, out of Bonegilla the better we liked it because only we and Canberra and the offices in Melbourne and Sydney knew of the number of ships carrying thousand of migrants appearing on the horizon ... Things had to be done sometimes in an ad hoc way, meeting problems quickly as they arose. There was no precedent, no one had ever done this before. It was like making decisions in war-time.40

If the reception centre was a challenge for the newcomers, accommodation, catering and the allocation of work were also challenges for the providers. It does not require a great stretch of the historical imagination to encompass the problems of those whose job it was to make things happen.

This does not make light of the consequences for the rapidly dispersed refugees. Plainly, little heed was taken of a refugee’s background or interests in allocating work during the surge. Groups of refugees were dispatched to workplaces if one in the group had survival English.41 Perhaps, worst of all, was the establishment of holding centres to relieve pressure on the reception centres. They accommodated dependants, when there was no workplace housing near a family’s breadwinner. Busloads of newly arrived women and children were despatched most commonly to Benalla, Uranquinty and Cowra, where they would wait months for their breadwinner to find family accommodation close to his work.

Other official records detail improvements to the reception centre and show Bonegilla becoming, over time, more family-friendly. Little was done to prepare the former army camp as a migrant reception centre, but subsequently there were three or four major refurbishments. Bonegilla made the national news in September 1949, when there was a health scandal. Seven young children died from the effects of malnutrition in one month. By the start of the next year, 21 had died. Immigration authorities were quick to blame the shipping agents. Shipboard outbreaks of gastro-enteritis led to the young being placed on boiled water diets for six or seven weeks.42 In response to the health scandal, the Reception

40 Sluga Bonegilla, 25.
41 Masing Juno, interview, BMM, 15 June 1950.
42 Sydney Morning Herald, 2 and 5 September 1949; Canberra Times, 3 and 6 September 1949.
Centre authorities divided Block 13 into family units. Families with very young children were supplied with bassinettes, access to hot water and a block refrigerator. The Block 13 kitchen received supplementary supplies of eggs and milk. A special infants’ feeding room was opened with flexible hours. Subsequently, publicists boasted of the kind of care Australia gave its young immigrants.\(^\text{43}\)

More blocks were made family-friendly when, near the end of the displaced persons scheme, the Department of Immigration decided to continue to use Bonegilla as a reception centre for assisted passage migrants who might require a better standard of accommodation. Work started on dividing huts, hitherto used as single-sex dormitories, into cubby-hole sized cubicles, each slightly less than 4m by 3m. The cubicles allowed some privacy and permitted married couples to stay together. Work also started on extending the sewer lines. There were, eventually, adjustments made to food supplies and eating arrangements. Unlike the displaced persons, who arrived as a mix of nationalities from a place the Australian public labelled ‘Europe’, the assisted generally arrived as shiploads from a clearly designated country. That made it possible to separate them into single-nationality blocks and to cater for them from a block kitchen that could focus on a particular national cuisine. So, for example, centre officials agreed early to house Dutch families in blocks separate from those used by the young single men from Italy and Greece. This meant that the Dutch were able to access food prepared to their liking, as long as their numbers were sufficient to make it economic for separate housing and feeding. As a result of the Italian riot and unrest in 1952, officials appointed Italian cooks to the blocks in which Italians were placed – even though they thought it more important to get a cook who could cope with large numbers, rather than one acquainted with national dishes.\(^\text{44}\) Nevertheless, kitchens in the Italian blocks received special supplies of fish, macaroni, spaghetti, salt, tomato puree, olive oil, garlic and coffee.\(^\text{45}\) When Loukas Kaperonis, a former Greek army cook, arrived with the first intake of Greek migrants in 1953, he was immediately appointed a cook in the new Greek block. That kitchen got additional supplies of tomato puree, olive oil and olives.\(^\text{46}\) A reception centre auditor noted that the ration variations ‘to meet the needs of migrant nationalities’ were detailed, but ‘without official sanction’.\(^\text{47}\)

\(^{44}\) Correspondence, 21 and 27 November 1956, A2567, 1956/104, NAA.
\(^{45}\) Audit report, 28 November 1952, A1831, 1947/693, NAA.
\(^{46}\) ‘Blocks opening closing’ A2567, 1956/104, NAA.
\(^{47}\) Inspection report, 28 November 1952, A1831, 1947/693, NAA.
There were further improvements from about 1956, when the Department of Immigration became more interested in attracting workers with skills rather than unskilled labourers and domestics. It thought that those with skills were likely to have a family. Accordingly, it set about providing even more of a family atmosphere at Bonegilla.

Catering arrangements changed. Kitchens were provided with new equipment such as electric stoves, electric stockpots and deep fat fryers. The messes were equipped with small family-sized tables and tubular steel chairs. In 1959 Erwin Poloczek, a cook, explained to the local press that people of every nationality, except perhaps the Germans, disliked their food being prepared by anybody other than a fellow national. Hence there were now different ‘home country’ meals prepared at Bonegilla. The Dutch liked semolina, flour, puddings, white sauces and cake. Italians preferred spaghetti, meat, tomatoes and baked beans. Yugoslavs and Hungarians liked hot spicy meals with plenty of paprika. Poloczek said that ‘roast beef, potatoes, lettuce and tomatoes comprise a good solid German meal’.

Even more improvements were ahead. In the early 1960s the site was consolidated and buildings renovated. The seven-day menu gave way to a more varied 28-day schedule of meals. Accommodation cubicles were provided with strip radiators, floor coverings, curtains and better furnishings including nine-inch inner spring mattresses. Wanting to reassure the world about the comfortableness of the centre, the director, Henry Guinn, simply invited the press and police, who had gathered to cover a riot in 1961, to dine in Block 19. Immigration publicists boasted in 1965:

The first settlers in the post-war period would find it hard to recognise the centre now. Stark outlines have gone for today there are some 15 000 trees, both Australian and European. Banks, churches, a school, hospital and leisure centre are among the facilities.

I am not altogether consoled by the long list of improvements suggesting Bonegilla was becoming more family-friendly, for they also draw attention to the conditions that prompted change: infants without bassinettes; parents without hot water; 22-person dormitories; iron camp beds with thin mattresses; unheated huts; drop-pit latrines. Bonegilla may have gradually become more inviting, but it took a long time to happen and a lot had to be done. The improvements do, however, suggest

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48 BMM, 14 February 1959.
49 ‘Immigration hostels’ A12111, 65/22/8, NAA.
that expressions of dissatisfaction with the facilities or the food might be matched against time of arrival.

Dismal and kind memories

Hamilton detects in indigenous studies of recent times ‘a rhetoric of uncovering unknown sources’ and ‘giving voice to the unheard’. 50 Similarly, the media and scholars have made great use of individual testimony in building up pictures of the character of Bonegilla and other migrant accommodation centres. There have been attempts to recover post-war refugee and migrant voices that ‘have largely remained silent, out of earshot of mainstream Australian history’, 51 ‘to rescue them from obscurity’ 52 and to let the immigrants ‘speak for themselves’. 53 Memory pieces are prized as eyewitness accounts that carry the authenticity of the direct witness. They are the raw materials that help humanise histories of immigration. They make it possible to tap or reflect on the feelings and thinking of the newly arrived. They explain facilities and reception processes from the point of view of the residents.

Hamilton worries that the authenticity of eye-witness accounts is hard to dispute. 54 However prized, first-hand memory accounts require some reckoning. Memories are nudged by each other, by present circumstances and by the interlocutor. As Nonja Peters cautions, ‘We know that the perceptions and memories of those interviewed have been influenced by the passage of time, by the age of the storyteller, by the process of telling and retelling the story, and by the retrospective understanding of the situation.’ 55 Speaking more generally, Inga Clendinnen contends that ‘Historians ... are at once the custodians of memory – the retrievers and preservers of the stories by which people have imagined their personal and civic lives – and the devoted critics of those stories’. 56

Oral historians have developed sophisticated ways of eliciting and analysing memory evidence. 57 Perhaps more crudely I have relied prin-

50 Hamilton ‘Sale of the century?’, 142.
51 Sluga Bonegilla, 137–138.
53 Peters Milk and Honey, xi.
54 Hamilton ‘Sale of the century?’, 141–142.
55 Peters Milk and Honey, xiii.
56 Inga Clendinnen ‘The history question: who owns the past?’, Quarterly Essay 22, 2006, 43.
cipally on written and recorded-voice impressions of Bonegilla in which comments on food have arisen without explicit prompting. Such comments form part of the general gist of what residents recall. I have conducted about twenty semi-formal interviews, none with a specific focus on food. I have also spoken with many site visitors and have gleaned material from the memory shards they leave in visitor books. I am conscious of the problems associated with using such sources.

Historians focused on reception centres have noted how perceptions of the character of such places, the conditions, and even the food differ. Complaints from the memory bank about the stench of boiled or dripping-fried mutton have to be accommodated beside fond memories of the hearty breakfast on a new day in a new land. Even Eric Richards, who insists on Bonegilla’s ‘unsavoury reputation’, acknowledges that ‘Bonegilla was always controversial and left mixed memories’. Explanations of the mixed memories might make much of personal dispositions, social, political and economic backgrounds, English language competence or the age and gender of those doing the remembering. Or they might take into consideration the ambience at a set time.

Perhaps the most common explanation is based on the different expectations of displaced persons and assisted migrants. The displaced were from hungry Europe. They were used to the inconveniences of European refugee camps. Bonegilla provided shelter, food, clothing, English instruction, health care and the prospect of a job at Australian award rates. The contemporary media warmed to the explanation that the displaced would cope with the temporary accommodation provided. Actually, the Good Neighbour Council was not so sure that the displaced were so easily pleased. It argued they were facing difficulties in getting appropriate jobs and satisfactory housing. They disliked the separation of families and the segregation into non-English-speaking hostels, and they had ‘difficulties with the preparation of food.’

There are other memory pockets. Unlike the displaced, Dutch assisted migrants felt they had been lured to Australia and, after the novelty of a luxury-liner voyage, found themselves housed in a style of accommodation

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58 The voices of some former Bonegilla residents linger in the National Library Oral History collection and in two ABC radio broadcasts.
59 On using memory shards see Bruce Scates ‘The first casualty of war’, Australian Historical Studies 38 (130), October 2007, 312.
60 Sluga Bonegilla, 37; Panich Sanctuary?, 81; Peters Milk and Honey, 145; Postiglione ‘It was just horrible’, 9.7.
61 Richards Destination Australia, 228.
62 Report to Immigration Advisory Council, 1950, A1269/1950, NAA.
they had not expected. The Italians expected to be placed in work on arrival. They hated the three months wait in temporary camp conditions due to an economic recession. Food became a catalyst for their frustration: it ‘was just horrible’. There were three meal-time demonstrations in August 1952; in one they protested about the way pasta was cooked and in another at being served carrots and rissoles. Long-term residents and those who were young often have kinder memories.

It is important to understand that Bonegilla was primarily an employment office. Assisted passage migrants, like the displaced persons before them, had initially signed an agreement to work at a government designated job for two years. Employment officers interviewed the newcomers and dispatched them to workplaces all over Australia. This is what Bonegilla was about. As Jock Collins reminds us, the labour market was central to understanding the migrant experience. Assimilation was, first and foremost, into the Australian workforce. The central concern was life chances rather than life styles.

In 1950 the Department of Immigration advised that 90 per cent of the 4637 employed at its accommodation centres were New Australians. At Bonegilla many of the jobs were food related. Large numbers were employed as kitchen hands or cooks. Some were employed in a central butchery. Others worked in the supply stores and distributed food stuffs to the various kitchens. Some cultivated vegetables, potatoes, beans and onions in a four hectare vegetable garden that provided fresh and cheap produce. Such jobs lasted for two years. Those who accepted jobs at the centre were prepared to accept its shortcomings. Accommodation costs were low. The job was known and less risky than a job elsewhere. Married couples with two jobs at the Centre could avoid separation. Staff had separate more comfortable staff blocks supplied with a richer diversity of food rations. In the Block 19 staff mess there were table cloths, iced water on the table and urns nearby for diners to make their own hot drinks. The weekly menu for staff messes included dishes not available to transients: casserolied chops, steak and kidney pie, corned silverside, curry and rice and scrambled eggs. Eating at Bonegilla could be reasonably civilised.

63 Peters Milk and Honey, 25, 39, 164.
64 Postiglione ‘It was just horrible’, 9.8–9.9.
65 Special branch report 4 September 1952, A6122, 584, NAA.
67 Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, 19 October 1950, 1029.
68 Panich Sanctuary, 48–85.
69 Auditor’s report, 28 November 1952, A1831, 1947/643, NAA. See also Panich Sanctuary, 84–85.
Work at Bonegilla provided newcomers with a firm stepping stone. Many stayed for years. Others found their on-the-job training at Bonegilla helped them get jobs elsewhere. The long-term residents were hailed as ‘shining examples of integration’.\textsuperscript{70} Generally they remember the pride they took in their own work and the achievement of the centre. They dismiss the riots of 1952 and 1961 as disturbances that had been sensationalised by the press. They are loyal to what they saw as worthy and realisable reception centre goals. They counter criticisms of it as a bleak camp of no hope somehow akin to modern-day detention centres. The memories of the long-term resident were deep and often affectionate. A return visit ‘feels like coming home’.\textsuperscript{71}

Indeed, former staff and their children have developed an ownership of the site. They were important in organising the 1987 reunion and agitating for a national immigration museum. They have tried to shape memory of the place. In 1987, for example, former cook, Frank Sal (Hungary 1949) admitted the food was horrible, ‘but no one can say he was hungry’. Bob Ivkovic (Serbia 1949), another former cook, went further: ‘there was nothing wrong with the food – it was just Europeans were not used to it’.\textsuperscript{72} This was the most common response to food critics. The food may have appeared strange to newcomers, but there was always plenty at Bonegilla.

The young seem to remember Bonegilla and its food differently from their parents. For the young, migration is remembered as a family experience, recalled principally through the prism of parental anecdotes and photos as well as direct observation. Often there are dark undertones. Many remember mother crying. Some remember separation from father when he was required to work elsewhere. Some remember the strangeness of being called to meals by men in tall white hats hitting a triangle gong. Others remember the novelty of having to queue for meals. Some recall their parents listening in the queues for someone using their native language so that they could strike up a conversation. Others remember their families gravitating to the same table in the crowded mess so as to personalise their particular eating place in a small way.

Young people also remember migration as a great adventure and Bonegilla as part of the even bigger adventure of growing up. For many, Bonegilla was a holiday camp where new friendships were easily made.

\textsuperscript{71} For example, King, a social worker quoted in Sluga \textit{Bonegilla}, 94–95 and R Leovic, letter to the \textit{Canberra Times}, 7 December 1987.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{BMM}, 5 December 1987.
They recall new sensory experiences in what were strange surrounds at Bonegilla. Most often they seem to remember the food as being plentiful. Unlike the adults, few remember it as stodgy or complain about the frequency with which mutton was served. Instead the young remember food indulgences: the beckoning smell of hot cocoa, milk arrowroot biscuits and loads of bread, butter and jam. They remember their first encounters with a whole pineapple, watermelon, large peaches and the gritty pleasures of eating Milo dry from the tin.73

Visual images nurture, even fix memories for the young and not so young. Albury Library Museum and the State Library of Victoria have large collections of migrants’ unofficial photographs that tend to blunt or complicate dismal stories of bleakness and complaint. It was the long-resident who seemed most likely to access a Box Brownie to photograph workmates, family and friends. Some of their photographs show how they found opportunities to arrange food and drink to celebrate occasions, or simply to get to know each other. There are family celebrations – baptisms, birthdays, first communions and wedding receptions. There is the jollity of the Hume Public Service Club. There is the tea, coffee and biscuits at the YWCA. The single men and women gather at the canteen to socialise. There are happy outings along Lake Hume, for example, a group of young people venturing beyond parental gaze into the countryside to picnic with a hamper and a flagon.

Some photos indicate the camp cunning of the resourceful and resilient. In spite of the fire and health hazards, migrants used primuses, kerosene heaters or fornellois to cook in their own huts – and so ignore the dining room. Both Italians and Greeks would venture into the countryside to hunt and kill rabbits to vary their diet. Some Greeks insisted on fishing in Lake Hume, but drew complaint when they gutted the fish in the communal ablutions block. Russian and Bosnian Muslims made contact with an Albanian butcher to secure supplies of halal meat. The smiling faces admit the possibility that however grim, Bonegilla did have its share of laughter and cheeky grins. It was not mired in misery. But again, as with the official photographs, intention is important. What lay behind shaping an image for a future self or family or for those left behind?

Generally the oral and written memories of the transients jostle with each other. There is a clamour of voices that provide rich pickings for ventriloquist journalists or historians wanting to make or unmake a point. Print has given some of them a wide currency, which may

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73 For detailed sources see Bruce Pennay The Young at Bonegilla, Wodonga: Parklands Albury-Wodonga 2010.
influence thinking about the place. Some of the displaced compare other food fare. Dymtro Chub (Ukraine 1952) recalls breakfast as ‘a feast possible perhaps only in the ministry back in the Soviet Union’.74 Gordana, (Serbia 1952) remembers, ‘I didn’t have to cook, that was good. The food was always the same, but that didn’t matter to us and it was plentiful. After [the refugee camp in] Italy we really liked it’.75 Others disliked the situation in which they found themselves. When Frank Korbl (Austria 1956) complained about ‘tasteless stew’, he was told to ‘go back to Germany where people are starving. No one wants you here!’76 Ferdi Boers (The Netherlands 1945) recalls, ‘The five of us cried – we couldn’t speak the language and we were homesick and we had to rough it. The food was shocking. We weren’t used to eating lamb and it was stinking hot.’77

Stefano Manfredi (Italy 1960), now a top hat celebrity chef employing sixty staff at a Sydney restaurant, has expounded several times on his disgust with Bonegilla food. Jean Duruz challenges the fairness of the contrast he drew as a six year old between the institutional food at Bonegilla and that produced in his grandmother’s kitchen in Italy.78 His account, Duruz fears, may have become ‘an archetypal story of the history of food and eating in Australia’, but its perspective contrasts with that of Monica Makowski, another restaurateur, but from Wollongong. She remembers her Polish father forever cutting off a portion of his serving to share with his children.79

Such media representations may reinforce resident memory. Other media photos and stories influenced host society perceptions. Inching out from Bonegilla and moving from arrival to early settlement experiences, the Border Morning Mail carried food-related stories that underpinned its notions of assimilation and absorption in the immediate host society. It noted even as early as 1951 that ‘they’ were influencing ‘us’. Staff employed at the reception centre had the local delicatessens stock rye bread, a variety of cheeses and sausage and coffee. Liquor stores were selling vodkas, sauternes and table wines.80

74 Dmytro Chub So This Is Australia, Doncaster: Bayda Books 1980, 16.
80 BMM, 18 September 1951.
The cosmopolitanism signalled with the arrival of new foods and drinks was, of course, a matter for community self-congratulation. So were the stories of Apex distributing sweets at Christmas and the Red Cross plying lonely New Australians in hospital with eggs and cigarettes.

Engagement with the local host community was regarded as important for assimilation.81 So centre directors were forever drawing the media’s attention to the connections made by local women’s church groups and service clubs. It was through the Country Women’s Association’s sharing a cup of tea with sultana cake or scones ‘at their place and ours’ that migrant women of all nationalities were made to feel welcome, and less strange. Mutual respect was based on exchanges of recipes and a sharing of common child and family care experiences.82 Migrants might remember the local community as being lukewarm, indifferent or even hostile, but the newspaper was intent on chronicling evidence of a welcoming local community absorbing new arrivals. For it, food facilitated cross-cultural acquaintanceships and acceptance of the ‘other’.

Conclusion

By the end of the 1960s the accommodation facilities at Bonegilla were deemed no longer suitable. New migrant reception facilities, providing flats with family bathing and cooking facilities, were built closer to workplaces. Bonegilla was not refurbished. The local press explained, ‘Migrants coming from conditions of improving affluence in Europe expected better conditions than a military-style camp where washing and toilet facilities were shared’. Bonegilla had become ‘redundant and obsolete’. Immigration Ministers, Snedden then Lynch, insisted in their final analyses that Bonegilla had ‘served its purpose well’, but it had never been intended for anything other than temporary accommodation. Almost apologetically they explained Bonegilla had been established ‘at a time when Government was faced with an acute shortage of housing and building materials’.83 The post-war immigration program ended when Bonegilla closed in 1971.84

Historians have had trouble making sense of the turbulence of newcomer memories. Which memories are to be selected as representative? And representative of what? John Murphy suggested that there was difficulty...
with making sense of ‘a kaleidoscope of experiences’. Interpretors at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York find themselves explaining a ‘fragmented history rather than a smooth whole’. Our Australian reception centre, like theirs, is ‘a multi-vocal and fragmented heritage landscape’. Accounting for the mixed memories of Bonegilla requires explanation of positive as well as harsh memories.

On-site and off-site interpretations of Bonegilla feed into, and on, big conversations about Australia’s immigration history. Although at Bonegilla migrant arrival and early settlement experiences may form a principal, if not a dominant theme, historians are bound to explain context and how the host society structured reception experiences. Further, they can take care not to muffle or silence contradictory voices – be they favourably or critically inclined in explaining how the place was experienced or administered. Their accounts of the perceptions of Bonegilla food might consider the providers as well as the fed.

About the author

Bruce Pennay is an adjunct associate professor at Charles Sturt University. He is a member of the Block 19 Bonegilla Advisory Committee which assists with Block 19 interpretation and management. As a public historian, he has prepared commissioned thematic histories for local government heritage studies and has published commissioned histories, principally related to the NSW/Victorian border district.

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85 John Murphy *Imagining the Fifties*, Sydney: UNSW Press 2000, 156.