

Behind the 'Big Man': Uncovering hidden migrant networks within Scandinavian-Australian sources

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Abstract

This paper is a reflective piece discussing several issues that have arisen during historical research regarding Scandinavian migration to Australia. The paper discusses some of the issues that historical sources have thrown up while researching Scandinavian Diasporic communities, namely the way in which networks of belonging and community have remained hidden behind sources controlled and produced by elite members of migrant groups and the figureheads of Scandinavian Australia – the 'Big Men'.¹

The 'Big Men' phenomena and associated problems of source bias and record incompleteness are examined, to point out reasons for a past historical focus that has been built upon exaggerated and contributory material and, as such, fails to give proper credit to other community members that were often involved in the creation of stronger and lasting social networks than these figureheads themselves. In particular, the role of Scandinavian women and their networks will be examined to point out alternatives to previous positivistic approaches to the impact of Scandinavians in Australia. The paper argues that for a more complete understanding of those involved in the creation of ethnic migrant communities, scholars must view all historical material in a way that focuses on not only the 'Big Men' that are fixed in the foreground of the sources, but those figures and groups that have until now remained in the peripheral vision, unexamined and uncelebrated.

Keywords

Australia, Big Men, Community building, Migration, Networks, Scandinavia, Sources, Women

A BLURRED IMAGE OF THE PAST

In order to construct as full and accurate picture of the Scandinavian-Australian community at the turn of the 20th Century as is

possible, one issue continues to blur the lense of history – that of the 'Big Men.' In most available source material, the preponderance of key individuals in the historical record has led to an exaggeration of their exploits and, in turn, their assumed heightened significance to community building processes amongst other Scandinavian migrants. Many of these positivistic accounts fail to interact with other elements of the community, especially women, who have been left out of much of the history of Scandinavia Australia. As Miriam Dixon has written about the male dominated state of the period and later histories of Australia, when it comes to creating community or national heroes 'Australian gods were and are largely misogynistic' (Dixon 1994:12). Source material, especially early historic accounts by migrant authors such as Jens Lyng, are steeped in a male-centric world view where the few larger than life characters remain the centre of the average Scandinavian-Australian's vision, and this has been passed onto modern readers. However, such sources and past histories are still useful, and this paper argues that the real challenge is in re-reading sources in order to reveal information that was hidden - or of no interest - to the original author. In this way, can a more complete and inclusive picture of late 19th Century Scandinavian-Australian communities be realised, by looking in the shadow of the 'Big Men'.

This paper derives from an historical enquiry into Scandinavian migration to Australia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the purpose of which is to ascertain the extent and significance of community building and ethnic identity construction within a white minority population under the growing umbrella of Australian nationalism. This study is particularly interested in how Scandinavians attempted to establish both national and transnational identities within a migrant context, at a time when political and cultural change in both the originating and host nations were affecting how these people viewed themselves, what they took to be important identifying markers of their ethnicity – such as the re-invention of the *Fugleskydning* (bird

¹ The term 'Big Men' is used here to categorise a group of successful and influential metropolitan migrants who, due to their high status within the Scandinavian migrant community, have historically overshadowed the contributions of others, such as women's groups and rural or more communal associations.

shoot),² – and how they related to others during the period. The physical and imagined networks that linked migrants into a larger ethnic community are also important in tracing and understanding the need for Scandinavians to still group upon past cultural and largely national similarities despite limited numbers, vast distances and an assumed ease of assimilation. The study hopes that the findings will be important for research of other minority groups during a period marked by the move away from cosmopolitanism towards a homogenous Australia, both racially white and culturally Anglo-Celtic Australian. However, for this study to be a success, it is important to uncover more about those actually involved in the creation of networks and fostering ethnic activities. While this was sometimes carried out by ‘Big Men’ such as church leaders, the hidden networks of those tributary characters – those behind the scenes working tirelessly to promote community ties – can also yield impressive results and flesh out understandings of Scandinavian needs for belonging, identity and cultural camaraderie while living in a new land. In order to do this, we must escape the ‘Big Men’ focus and look for others intent on this worthwhile goal.

An example of the frustrating inability to escape these figureheads occurred several months ago while conducting archival work in Brisbane. The majority of material surrounding the Scandinavian community had followed a pattern related to middle-aged, affluent Scandinavian men and their exploits in an Australian business or social environment. This was unsurprising, but presented a biased portrayal of the community and it was difficult to see whether groups had contact with one another regularly.

This perception was radically altered by the discovery a dilapidated book labelled ‘Autographs’ in a pile of Scandinavian ephemera. It initially appeared to be nothing more than a young girl’s collection of people that she had ran into from about 1905-1911 as she voyaged around Australia. Most of the diary was in English, but there was a smattering of Danish and Swedish within the pages, and it became clear that this girl (clearly a Dane or second-generation migrant) was meeting with and had collected the signatures of most of the recognisably important Scandinavians of the time, not to mention the mayors of Sydney, Bundaberg and

Cairns, consular officials, ships captains, as well as countless other members of rural Scandinavian migrant families. It even contained an original watercolour by Scandinavian artist Edward Friström, who was based in Brisbane at the time. While the information within was largely anecdotes and bad jokes, as a whole this book appeared to be a representative depiction of the web of networking and social relations to which certain Scandinavian migrants were privy.

Its pages traced the journey of a young girl and the migrants and officials she met with; how she kept in contact with others in a physical migrant network. It was also one of the first sources that had shown the small scale links between migrant communities – notes by other young girls with Scandinavian surnames, in areas such as Warwick, Kingaroy, Coolabunia, and Mt Morgan all showing the lower levels of migrant networking, and was clearly differentiated from the more usual information surrounding the elite metropolitan Scandinavians. It was unclear why a young girl would be meeting with Scandinavian consular officials in Sydney, or prominent pastoral figures on the Darling Downs, until her identity became clear. Marie Ries, the daughter of Hans Madsen Ries of Dannevirke New Zealand, Mayor, businessman, pastoralist, Lutheran Priest and possibly the most influential Dane in early 20th century Australasia. After hunting for a unique source of cultural networks by someone other than an elite Scandinavian, the ‘Big Men’ stumbling block remained.

The thesis’ research has primarily examined the cultural records of the few Scandinavians who left a discernible footprint in the Australian historical landscape. Beginning with an analysis of the Scandinavian foreign language press *Norden* which operated from 1897-1945, Church paper *Kirketidende* from about 1896-1900, as well as later sources such as the *Scandinavian Courier* of the 1970s, a strong picture of a vibrant yet small Scandinavian community at the turn of the 20th century can be created. This view has been strengthened through the various small periodicals linked to clubs and church groups, such as the Danish Church’s *The Messenger* of the 1930s-1960s, and the newsletters and records of long lived clubs such as Melbourne’s *Dannebrog* and Brisbane’s *Heimdall*. In May 2010 a research trip to archival centres in Canberra, Melbourne and Adelaide also found much new material to complement this in the form of more newspaper articles, family records, migrant diaries, memoirs, and photograph albums. Throughout these records, particularly the voluminous photo collections, were images of small Scandinavian groups scattered in rural

² The *Fugleskydning* or birdshoot is a Danish traditional shooting sport that became a very popular social sport amongst Scandinavian clubs in Australia. Competitors take turns to shoot at a wooden bird on a long pole, and dismember it shot by shot. The competitor to hit the last piece, the breastplate, becomes *Fuglekong* (birdking).

areas, united behind national flags, and then others portraying vibrant and energetic metropolitan groups such as the men's clubs of Brisbane and Melbourne. These images hint at the extent and importance of migrant networking and a sense of imagined community that was felt by both groups of migrants, and the interrelations between the rural and metropolitan.

The records indicate that the Scandinavian community was an extensive network of smaller family groups operating throughout Australia mainly in a rural setting, but linked by elite metropolitan centres with the ability to produce specifically Scandinavian ethnic material such as *Norden* and to use religious and social congregations to communicate and foster feelings of similar cultural heritage and the idea of an extended immigrant family over vast distances. However, the trail of information upon these smaller rural communities, or the majority of figures in group photographs, is largely unattainable. Instead, the sources continually focus upon the few 'Big Men' figures of the migrant community. Even the community press, with articles and information concerning the majority of this population, is swamped with stories promoting these figures.

Norden for example, continually focuses its attention upon the 'Big Men'. The front page story is often dedicated to the contributions of notable Scandinavian men to the development of Australia – establishing, in a way, a pride in success and validating their move to the new land through 'Big Men'. Full page spreads of the successes of people such as goldminer Claus Grönn, or photographer, business entrepreneur and Brisbane's Danish Consul Poul Poulsen, continually call for attention and hide more subtle links to the larger Scandinavian community that is scattered through women's pages, correspondence, or club news (see *Norden* 22 December 1900: 1; *Norden* 16 October 1909:1).

This is one issue that plagues past histories of the Scandinavians in Australasia, and in the primary source material the notable focus upon exaggerated accounts of a few leading figures is clouding perceptions of the full community. The few secondary sources available, such as the work of Olavi Koivukangas and John Martin, have mostly been produced as part of celebratory programs around the bicentennial in 1988, and as such have motives strongly influenced by the need to put forward a positivistic and contributionary history of minority ethnic groups (See Koivukangas 1974; Koivukangas & Martin 1986; Beijbom & Martin 1988). As they too have been built largely upon sources such as *Norden*, it is clear to see how they

have retained a 'Big Men' approach to the study of important migrants. The same names were present in almost every source, the same few people with their hands on the jugular of the Scandinavian community. Viewed by themselves, it would be easy to think that the entire community was built upon the backs of less than 20 'Big Men', rather than the some 16000 that identified as Scandinavians in the 1901 census (Jupp & York 1995:10, 25).

There are several reasons for this 'Big Men focus' in the records and later histories, and it is easy to be drawn to the exploits of the few Scandinavians who indeed seem to have accomplished so much during their lifetimes. Firstly, it is important to understand that of the full Scandinavian community of the late nineteenth century, records only exist concerning a handful of them, and these, to be expected, are the elite members whose records have survived in metropolitan centres. Only the small number of successful members of the community are ever discussed in detail in written surviving records, even newspapers set up to survey and communicate across the entire Scandinavian-Australian readership, and for the majority of the rural migrant communities nothing but the photographs or autographs gathered by travelling elites exist to illuminate the majority of the Scandinavian community. Some of these men, too, did deserve this pedestal, for the sheer number of achievements and qualifications that some of these migrants managed to accomplish is amazing. Several careers, long hours and a lot of hard work meant that many did amazing things and continually reappear in the record for this reason alone, such as Danish Consul, chemist, dentist, sugar scientist and teacher Jakob Christensen and blacksmith, engineer, and long serving Pastor PC Ligaard, not to mention the achievements of Hans Madsen Ries.

It is also important to note the purpose of the foreign language press, and while it is the greatest source for demonstrating the full nature of the community through correspondence and interaction, can be misleading in its agenda of celebration and exaggeration. *Norden* and its editor Jens Sorensen Lyng, for example, was a main proponent in writing an exaggerated history of Scandinavians to further hopes for migration from Europe and allow a greater chance of ethnic communities to develop, such as his own failed Scandinavian settlement in Kinglake, Victoria. His early histories, which were written simultaneously with the newspaper, show the need to promote Scandinavian contributions for his own success, as a larger community meant a larger readership and an increase in subscriptions for not only his paper but his literary endeavours

(See Lyng 1927; Lyng 1933). His news itself follows a 'Big Men' ideal, as its main purpose was to inform the community of the pioneering exploits of the few successful men and pushed a message of success and hope in the Scandinavian-Australian community.

For the historian, this creates a problem, and diverts attention away from other contributors to community building practices. Instead of focussing upon these figures who have dominated the front pages of the news and been written about so completely, we need to look behind their exploits and find other migrants that were investing in community building enterprises and often doing much more for inclusive group building and the maintenance of Scandinavian ethnicity. Within the records, there are often hints to the larger community, one made viable through the networking efforts of the people around the 'Big Men'. There were also many other people, often women who supported and facilitated these networks however.

Olga Claussen, for example, is one such person in the background contributing much to the continuation and improvement of imagined communities though her role as second editor of *Norden*. Under Jens Lyng, *Norden* followed a strongly contributory history for the first 7 or 8 years, where he steered the paper from strength to strength promoting a united Scandinavian community in Australia through columns focussing on important Scandinavians, events, and associations designed to create a strong Scandinavian readership. However, in 1906 Lyng moved to his community in Kinglake and left the paper in the hands of an unlikely heir – a young, unmarried Danish woman by the name of Olga Claussen, (*Norden* 1 April 1911:1) who was assisted by her family in carrying on Lyng's work (Koivukangas & Martin 1986:137).

Olga was instrumental in changing the paper from a propaganda-driven vehicle into a community noticeboard, taking some of the edge off the elitist and metropolitan focus of Lyng's previous period. It is during Olga's reign that the first 'Big Woman' is promoted through a page concerning concert singer Madam Agnes Jansen (*Norden* 7 July 1906: 3), and by 1909 Claussen had introduced an English page to include the families of Scandinavians who through marriage were unable to read the majority of the paper (*Norden* 21 August 1909: 13). Recipes begin to appear, written by other women contributors, and the paper shows signs of a more laid back and more welcoming tone. A strong sense of women's networking also becomes apparent, and in 1907 women such as Madam Waerne were using the paper to organise women's events and groups on par

with the men's social clubs – as she writes, 'the time is ripe for the realisation of some scheme for bringing the ladies together unhampered by the presence of the other sex' (*Norden* 7 August 1909: 13). Notes of thanks for aid from new migrant women appear, and the variedness of women's surnames suggests a more thorough integration and relationship with women from outside the Scandinavian community than before. Similarly, in the pages of *Norden* and even the later *Scandinavian Courier*, the most community orientated pages are most often the cooking pages, where recipes are exchanged regardless of nationality (*Norden* 12 December 1910:10; *Scandinavian Courier* March 1979:7). It is these areas, like the English page introduced by Claussen, that echo the strongest sentiments of inclusive community building and promote a much more hybrid migrant environment than proposed by elitist and inward looking 'Big Men' such as Jens Lyng. Eventually, the pressure of running the paper proved too much and Olga resigned in 1911, but by this time her mark had been left on the paper.

Similarly, other notable Scandinavians relied on the help of others around them and their contributions must be noted. Even 'Big Men' such as Pastor Ligaard, who supposedly single handedly was the Danish Church in Queensland between 1925-1961 (Koivukangas & Martin 1986: 143) also had much help in promoting the Danish church through the aid of his five daughters, who wrote and prepared much of his newsletter *The Messenger*, and without such help would not have been able to reach so many of his congregations across Queensland.

An analysis of these other circles of community building demonstrates another interesting idea for further study. It is the women's role in the sources that seem to show stronger connection to Australian society as a whole, rather than the elitist men who are focussed on nationalist concerns in their walled-in clubs, or the spiritual salvation of fellow countrymen. Men, through these records, seem to live in an impervious bubble of Scandinavianism, intent on remaining separate from a growing dominance of 'Australianism'. Women, on the other hand, show a greater regard for the connections in the here and now, and a 'bottom-up' style of migrant community building is prevalent here. There are also many sources detailing the role of women and families in rural centres who were important in holding onto or recreating ethnic tradition, such as the preparation of social events and fundraisers. Ethnic identity and national pride was further promoted by women's groups through later events such as the Swedish Evening in Melbourne in 1937, and the King Haakon Norwegian Relief

Pageant of 1940. The ways in which women's groups contributed to this sense of identity has been overlooked due to the focus upon successful 'Big Men', but it must be made clear that such group activities were often more vital for the promotion of an inclusive migrant community than the individual achievements of the few role models afforded by the 'Big Men' epithet. This distinction between male and female, should not suggest a universal phenomenon – certainly, many sources are heavily biased towards positivistic historical importance and the point of this paper has been to argue for some sort of balance. In order to reach an equilibrium in understanding the true significance and extent of Scandinavian ethnicisation and community building in Australia, we must deflate some of these big figures and instead promote those that have remained hidden yet were still just as valuable in promoting migrant community.

Thus, Marie Ries and her diary can be perceived as even more important than their 'Big Men' links. Although relying on her father to enable her to connect with the community on such a scale, she is far more influential than her father in plotting the extent of these migrant networks. Much like Jens Lyng, Marie acts as a contemporary historian, chronicling in however little detail, the important relationships she as a member of the Scandinavian-Australian community had during the period. She is vital in showing the connections that women, and second generation Scandinavians, were making within the Pacific landscape. Similarly, the groups of women and men who formed organisations away from the elite men's clubs did much for the creation of ethnic tradition and the continuation of their heritage, and these too require study on a level with their 'Big Men' counterparts.

The 'Big Men' phenomenon is certainly an issue in the historical study of migrant communities in which limited sources survive to give a full picture of not only elite migrant society, but the entire range of community involvement. To see the ties between migrants, their communities, and the society in which they lived, it is important to look behind these

figures who dominate the records for the social networks that really allowed those who idolised the 'Big Men' to feel as if they were a part of the community. The hints and traces of migrant networking currently being located in this study have shown that the least celebrated of these people may have actually been the greatest proponents of inclusivity and given the most to the encouragement of new members of the community – migrant or otherwise. Through a focus upon such hidden groups and activities, the image of Scandinavian communities and networks of identity can become sharper and more detailed as more people's smaller contributions to the group begin to balance the great successes of the few.

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