Wodonga’s Bonegilla: Depicting and Remembering the Impact of Post-war Immigration

Bruce Pennay

Abstract
This article is about local engagement with a post-war immigration reception centre. I explain immediate host community perceptions of and interactions with Bonegilla, its residents and ex-residents while the centre was operating. Then, I trace the way locals, working with ex-residents, created and championed Block 19 Bonegilla as a memory place and heritage asset. In attempting to fathom the local circumstances of Bonegilla’s memorialisation, I emphasise the roles played by locals and local government. I portray the heritage-making of Bonegilla as a facet of a broader process of the place-making of Wodonga and Albury–Wodonga.

Add another Five is a ten-minute black-and-white film made in 1964 to promote Wodonga. It was produced for Wodonga Shire Council by the border district’s new television station, AMV4, to accompany the town’s entry in Victoria’s triennial Premier Town Contest. It follows a simple storyline in which Shire President Jack Hore takes a newly arrived migrant family of five from Bonegilla on a tour of the town to show them the employment and education opportunities, the comfortable housing and the friendly reception they might enjoy if they settle locally. It begins with a sweeping panorama of the Bonegilla Reception Centre, ‘the biggest in Australia’. It ends...

Fig. 1 A copy of the film Add another Five survives in the archive of the Rotary Club of Wodonga, which instigated its production in 1964 when the club president was Col. Henry Guinn, the director of the Bonegilla Reception Centre. (Collage: John Pennay)
with the shire president prompting a sign writer to ‘add another five’ to the 9,000 population sign at the entry to the town.

With the film and its entry into that contest, Wodonga Council hoped to win ‘prestige, publicity, increased investment [and] greater civic pride’. Apart from the Premier Town judging panel, there were three prime target audiences to be addressed with this place promotion exercise. New settlers might be enticed to stay in a town that had good economic prospects and was friendly to newcomers. Prospective investors were made aware of the large local migrant employment pool, both male and female, many of whom were well qualified but underemployed. And existing residents were reassured that authorities were making provision for future growth and that migrants brought something of a continental air to country town living.

In 1964 Bonegilla was at its best. Increasingly anxious about low migrant retention rates, the Department of Immigration was assuring prospective non-British migrants that the reception arrangements it made for them at Bonegilla were more than satisfactory. It had made big improvements to the facilities and grounds. It had helped produce two official films and other publicity material insisting that Bonegilla was no longer a stark, former army camp that had been lightly dusted down for use as a migrant accommodation centre. It depicted Bonegilla as a park-like environment in a beautiful river-side setting.

However, within a month of the film’s release, Hubert Opperman, the minister for immigration, made it known that none of the new funds for improving migrant reception facilities would be spent at Bonegilla. Migrants were coming from conditions of improving affluence in Europe and expected better conditions than a military-style camp with communal eating, washing and toilet facilities. Moreover, Bonegilla was inconveniently placed away from the capital cities where most migrants were finding work. The retention of Bonegilla as Australia’s major reception centre was becoming ‘less and less defensible’, according to James Jupp, then a contemporary critic.

The Border Morning Mail worried about what closure of the migrant centre might mean for the local economy. Towards the end of 1965 it despatched a journalist to Bonegilla to produce a report about the facilities that would be abandoned if the centre closed. In a brief but unusually lyrical and contemplative report, the journalist tentatively advanced the notion of memorialisation. Prompted by the sight of one
of the Hume and Hovell memorial cairns near Bonegilla, he paused to wonder about similar monuments ‘to a great spirit’ that might be important ‘in the hearts of the future’. With Bonegilla firmly in mind, he asked what from the 1960s might become ‘a marker in coming years’. In his view it seemed that something important and memorable had happened to Wodonga and to Australia at Bonegilla.

Within another few months, there were the first indications that Bonegilla was to revert to its original use as an army camp. In mid-1965, cadets temporarily lived in some of the accommodation blocks and, during the next year, the army accommodated trainees for the war in Vietnam in a number of the disused blocks. From 1966 to 1971, soldiers and new migrants were, once again, to occupy Bonegilla in separate quarters, as they had between 1947 and 1949. The transformation back into an army camp was completed in 1971 when Bonegilla closed. Immigration Minister Snedden depicted the closure as marking an end to the post-war immigration program.

The 1964 film, which was intended as a loud hurrah for Wodonga, became a last hurrah for Bonegilla. In 1964 Bonegilla and post-war immigrants figured large in contemporary attempts to understand the kind of place Wodonga wanted to be. It appeared just prior to the minister’s indication that the reception centre might have a limited future. Consequently, the film prompts us today to think about the local impact of immigration and, by association, raises questions about host society reception of post-war immigrants. Given the events that followed, it also prompts thinking about how and why Bonegilla was to become ‘probably the best remembered’ of the reception centres nationally.

After further reading, interviews and consideration, I find it necessary to extend and qualify the arguments I advanced in an earlier piece in this journal. I ended that article with the observation that ‘Bonegilla is about the migrant experience and the nation’s experience of migration’. Prompted, in part, by a recent decision by Wodonga City Council to become the local steward of the Block 19 Bonegilla heritage place, I focus here on the local experience of migration. I examine local engagement with Bonegilla, first while it was operational and then, subsequently as a memory place. I test further how ideas about the place were formed, retained and projected.
Recent explanations of how and why Bonegilla has been remembered provide another prompt for this reconsideration. Jayne Persian and Alexandra Dellios differ on the extent to which national narratives, promoting a celebratory multiculturalism, have dominated interpretations of migrant accommodation places. Persian regrets that it has not been recognised that personal/family history is the trigger to remembrance at places like Bonegilla. Dellios, on the other hand, argues convincingly that the voices of ex-residents ‘[endure] within or alongside official frameworks’ and are not dominated by them. The ex-residents and their families ‘embrace and include themselves in a wider narrative’. She emphasises the importance of ex-resident ‘grass-root activists’ in commemorating Bonegilla. I seek to extend her definition of grass-roots activists to include non-migrant local volunteers, museum professionals, and local government organisations in advocating the heritage worthiness of Block 19 Bonegilla, both in and beyond the early years. Unlike Persian and Dellios, I consider Bonegilla as local heritage as well as immigration and migrant heritage.

As a participant observer, that is an interested local resident from 1983 on, and as a member of, first, the Albury Regional Museum advisory committee and, then, the Parklands Albury–Wodonga Bonegilla steering/advisory committee, I formed the view that local advocates, as much as ex-residents and migrant groups, were the initiators and champions of the heritage value of Bonegilla. Interviews I conducted between 2013 and 2015 with eighteen people whom I considered key players confirmed my view. So did further examination of the relevant files of the two councils, the Albury–Wodonga Development Corporation and the Border Mail.

Placing and Representing the Reception of Immigrants in Neighbourhoods

Scholars from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds in Australia and elsewhere have increasingly insisted that the migrant experience was structured and is best represented at the local level, although the national level remains important for understanding the overall context. Among the immigration scholars, Jock Collins, for example, reminds his readers that, ‘Immigration ... not only fills labour shortages, it also changes neighbourhoods and the nature and character of host societies themselves’. Online museum curator John Petersen explained that the work he undertook at the Migration Heritage Centre in New South Wales
was ‘unashamedly personal and regional’. He found it most advantageous to focus on arrival places, namely migrant accommodation centres and worker hostels. Such places were memorable to both the migrants and the host community; they appeared to be high on the emotional register of many newcomers and left their mark on established local residents. Other museum professionals have also anchored representation of immigration in a local context rather than having it ‘floating around in a general idea of Australia’.

Andrea Witcomb suggests, for example, that the conversations museums start with their visitors could focus on how newcomers and the longer settled rub shoulders with each other every day, and contends that this is most likely to be apparent in specific locations.

In Britain there have been calls for studies of ‘community transformation as a whole’, which would involve ‘tracing the contours of [newcomer/longer settled] interaction and trust’ at local levels. Christine Goodall has probed literature about trust within communities for a theoretical framework through which to study relationships between host societies and new arrivals. She attempted an analysis of conditions that were conducive to the development of a welcoming local society, open to taking the leap of faith to trust strangers. Her focus was on hospitality, or what Ghassan Hage might call the ‘local cuddle’. Similarly, beyond Australia, Ash Amin probes the effort involved in overcoming the risks and uncertainties involved with sets of strangers co-habiting in urban locations. He looks at how difference is negotiated in the local everyday and explains how the mingling and sharing of space makes the stranger familiar. The encounters of living, playing and schooling together, he explains, help people live at ease with one another. Prolonged personal interactions among strangers within neighbourhoods lessen anxiety and help develop an urban etiquette leading to mutual respect.

A good starting point to recapture something of the contemporary mental furniture related to post-war non-British migrant reception and settlement in Australia is Jean (Craig) Martin’s pioneering study of newcomer arrival experiences and community attitudes in Goulburn (NSW). In 1953 and again in 1962, Martin examined arrival experiences from the perspective of the newcomers in what she called a ‘cliquey’ country town. Goulburn was then similar in size to Wodonga and Albury, and enjoyed similar economic prospects as a sizeable
regional hub, as yet, in 1953, unaffected by the emergence of Canberra as a rival in its region.

Martin analysed work opportunities, housing patterns and social interactions. She interviewed many of the newcomers. They felt, she reports, like ‘second class citizens’; they saw the locals as condescending, and they felt that locals thought there was no real need to get to know ‘New Australians’. In 1962 she detected differences in the expectations of newcomers and hosts. Her migrant interviewees were, by then, enjoying the self-esteem and self-respect that came with greater personal economic certainty. All the same, she referred to what she termed ‘the [local] limits of hospitality’.

Subsequently in 1971, Martin’s research identified that migrants from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds were in the least attractive jobs and houses. They were proportionately more highly represented among the disadvantaged. Further, ‘we [their hosts were] discourage and unsupportive rather than actively hostile’. During the 1960s and more particularly in the 1970s, governments legislated to overcome newcomer disadvantage and to offer a wide range of settlement supports. Much of the effort to redress inequities came after Bonegilla closed in 1971. Bonegilla thus operated within what may have been a widespread climate of ‘limited hospitality’.

There are, then, precedents as well as exhortations for examining the impact of post-war immigration at a local level and for attempting to fathom the local circumstances in which any commemoration of the experiences involved took place. But, first, I have to explain what is meant by heritage-making and place-making, for I see the heritage-making activity related to Bonegilla as part of a wider process of place-making, related not only to Bonegilla itself, but also more widely to Albury–Wodonga, and particularly to Wodonga.

Heritage analysts have pondered the constructed nature of heritage. They consider heritage-isation as a process rather than heritage as a thing. Hence, they try to unravel the ‘variety of engagements that reveal the socio-political and cultural processes at work in defining (or selecting) heritage in the first place and in modulating the response of communities and individuals to it’. They examine community involvement in ‘the production’ of heritage. They also deal with the questions about heritage places set by Ashworth, Graham and Tunbridge: ‘whose heritage is this?’; ‘who created, crafted and managed
it?'; ‘who needs it?’ and ‘what do we want to do with it?’.

I attempt to follow such leads here.

Place-making means more than place promotion, which puts emphasis on ‘place branding’, ‘destination strategies’ and ‘identity hooks’ aimed at producing a ‘place product’ yielding competitive advantage in the tourist trade. By way of contrast, Arjun Appadurai’s concept of place-making is less commercially oriented. He has coined the phrase ‘production of locality’ and argues that neighbourhoods are ‘imagined, produced and maintained’. Place-making involves residents continuously attempting to come to grips with understandings of a local world and trying to depict its character. Memory is integral to this activity.

Those who explore place-making at a local level in Australia show that it involves local governments, local businesses and local community members as co-producers. Indeed, it is portrayed as community initiated and realised, and frequently it involves capturing the emotional feel of place. Louise Prowse has dared a general reckoning of place-making in declining country towns. She shows how local communities have ‘looked to the past’ and seized on some features to expound on as a ‘unique history’ that develops the ‘distinctive character’ of the place. Like her, I too, have pointed to the central role played by local newspapers in helping local citizens determine the present-day character of their community by making sense of their past. I have also emphasised the crucial role played by local government in designating and owning memory places as expressive of local historical identity.

**Taking in Strangers, Wodonga and Albury, 1947–1971**

What did contemporary residents of Wodonga and Albury make of Bonegilla and of changes the increasing migrant presence brought to their towns while the reception centre was functioning? How were Bonegilla, its residents and ex-residents perceived by the immediate host community?

The most obvious impacts of post-war immigration on Wodonga and Albury were on the size and ethnicity of the local population. Between 1947 and 1971, while Bonegilla was operating, the population of Wodonga tripled and that of Albury doubled. In 1947 fewer than one in twenty people was born overseas; by 1971 it was one in every five.

The post-war years, indeed the last half of the twentieth century, were generally kind to the Albury–Wodonga district. Both centres
had grown as war-time garrison towns and, then, as post-war migrant centre supply depots. The economic stimulus of the Bonegilla reception centre went beyond supply, however, as many migrants settled locally and expanded the workforce. The local economy was invigorated with migrants moving into self-employment, and many overseas-born women entering paid employment.  

Albury–Wodonga grew into a manufacturing and distribution centre on the basis of its unique position as a transport hub at the break of railway gauge. It prospered as part of the industrialisation of regional Australia. Plainly not all the years were prosperous and not all locals or newcomers enjoyed prosperity, but there was a general economic optimism. As Goodall has observed, the optimism that came with an expanding economy and job market can inspire confidence in the community’s ability to cope with large numbers of new arrivals.  

The increase in size and ethnic diversity pulled at the shape of the urban conglomerate known as Albury–Wodonga. Bonegilla and the newcomers were, as Goodall explains of her study place, ‘spatially managed’. For the most part the reception centre sat, like a country town gaol or mental asylum, out of sight on the periphery of the town, geographically and socially isolated from the community and drawing only the close attention of those who had some economic or employment link. The Department of Immigration went to some length to explain that the migrant reception centre would not disrupt local life. Bonegilla had its own churches, banks, sporting fields, cinema, hospital, police station. As a result some newcomers felt that at Bonegilla they were not quite in Australia. For many locals, Bonegilla was not quite in Wodonga.  

Bonegilla was a distinct locality that never escaped its military associations. After the war, the neighbouring Bandiana remained an active ordnance depot and consequently Bonegilla remained part of a military zone, approached by road from Wodonga via huge open paddocks filled with large numbers of tanks and trucks. At Bonegilla, overseas newcomers were rendered other—isolated, transient, controlled, fed and, in many cases, even clothed differently. However, they did not stay pocketed in Bonegilla, as increasing numbers settled locally.  

The conglomerate of Albury–Wodonga was structured around the larger and more established Albury centre with two smaller urban
settlements at Lavington, in the adjacent Hume Shire to the north, and Wodonga, across the river and the state border to the south. In 1947 Albury had a substantial city-like appearance and better quality housing than its immediate neighbours. Most of Albury’s houses were made of brick and were connected to sewerage, gas and electricity services, whereas houses in Wodonga and Lavington were usually of weatherboard or fibro, had fuel stoves and were not sewered. Through the 1950s, the shire councils in Wodonga and Lavington, unlike the municipal council in Albury, tolerated temporary dwellings such as self-built garage houses and half-houses. Impecunious newcomers gravitated to the cheaper and comparatively underserviced housing.

By 1971, Wodonga had large clusters of German, Austrian and Yugoslav-born residents. Lavington had many Dutch and German residents. Overall, those born overseas spread widely and fairly evenly. Ethnic clubs and denominational churches did not attract any one group to any one area, as they did in cities. The newcomers did not, as was feared, ‘congregate in little communities of their own’. While public transport services barely existed, both Albury and Wodonga were compact; everything and everyone was within a fairly easy bicycle ride. The newspaper fostered the kind of familiarity encountered in the typical face-to-face rural community of the time.

The growing presence of migrants meant more frequent rubbing of shoulders. Slowly but surely, those who were once physically distant neighbours became street neighbours. Strangers encountered fleetingly in streets, shops and public spaces became, over time, fellow workers, church congregation members, hospital patients, school parents, voluntary organisation members or hobby enthusiasts. Instead of being the recipients of local goods and services, migrants increasingly became suppliers and deliverers of goods and services, and long-established locals had to negotiate everyday differences with them. Just as migrants had their first interactions with Australians over shop counters, so too many townspeople had their first-time encounters with people who spoke with accents as shop assistants. Formal naturalisation ceremonies became civic ceremonies after 1954, and local government welcomed new citizens not only to their new country but also to their new local community. More intimately the newcomers became school mates, youth group friends, boyfriends or girlfriends. Friendships became courtships and even, sometimes, marriages. New and old citizens shared
the marriage, birth and death columns of the local newspaper. New and old learnt to cohabit without rancour; they shared a space, a locality. If nothing more, both the ‘we’ and the ‘they’ of sets of strangers learnt to cope with each other.37

Fig. 2 By the late 1960s locals were encountering migrants as service providers. V. Mucchi (painter) and Riassa Halonkin (nurse) paused in their work for Immigration Department publicity photographs. Riassa is being hugged by a hospital patient with whom she could talk in Romanian. (Courtesy National Archives of Australia, NAA, A12111, 1/1967/10/10–11)

Newspapers were influential in reflecting and guiding public thinking about immigration and immigrants. This was particularly true of local newspapers, given their reach within small communities. The Border Morning Mail was a large progressive daily newspaper with a wide cross-border print community, and it almost doubled in circulation from 10,000 in 1947 to nearly 20,000 in 1971. I have traced elsewhere how, on a daily basis, it shaped perceptions of Bonegilla, its residents and immigration more generally in its stories, editorials, photographs and letter columns. It gave voice to local anxieties and it hailed what it saw as successful interactions between recent migrant and the longer settled. It congratulated the local community on its hospitality to the newcomers and the newcomers on assimilating.38

This local newspaper grew well practised in reassuring its readers that the Bonegilla reception centre was functioning smoothly and that the increasing migrant presence was benign, if not enriching. Much of its reporting seems to have been instigated or guided by the director of the reception centre. Consequently, it may be read as a monitored
instrument of the state. Nevertheless, there was some self-initiated investigative work on Bonegilla health issues and local employment matters. Reflective reports on topics such as ‘Migrants are influencing our way of life’ were intended to reassure readers all was well. The Border Morning Mail focused particularly on showing assimilation as being realised in the everyday experience of the local community. Continuous, personalised, and pictured news items insinuated the newcomers into the community. Photographs showed the newcomers and their children participating in the local festivities. The migrants were moving into and becoming part of border district neighbourhoods and community. They were on an assimilationist trajectory. Readers were encouraged to develop trust in the company of these strangers.

It was the reception centre’s responsibility through its language and civics instruction program to ‘fit these people to take their place in the community’, but the whole community was enlisted to help new arrivals settle. The country towns near hostels such as Bonegilla had the special responsibility of being the immediate hosts, and it was assumed country towns would be better than cities in giving ‘a more homely introduction to Australia’. Centre directors encouraged the local host community to engage with their centres by attending concerts and displays of handicrafts.

Lutheran and Catholic churches had been the most adept at meeting the social and spiritual needs of the first cohorts of ‘Displaced Persons’. Subsequently other church congregations separately welcomed folk of the same denomination. As well as the churches, there were other welcoming volunteer organisations. Colonel Henry Guinn, the longest serving director of Bonegilla, 1953–1965, had a file labelled ‘Assimilation’ that contained correspondence relating to the supportive activities of the Country Women’s Association (CWA), Young Women’s Christian Association, Apex, Business and Professional Women’s Organisation, Jaycees, Lions and Rotary. CWA branches in the district were the most active, inviting migrant women to morning and afternoon teas where they might share recipes and swap tales of bringing up children. Sporting clubs engaged with the newcomers and sporting field encounters between migrants and non-migrants were highly prized for producing goodwill. One hotly contested ‘nil-all’ football game in 1959 had the acting director declare that, ‘Here was assimilation at its best’. Football and basketball were ‘playing a most important part in
promoting good relations between centre teams and those from the neighbouring districts’.45

Some contemporaries thought Wodonga served the nation well in this regard. In his covering letter for the Premier Town Contest entry in 1964, the local federal member, Mac Holten, praised ‘the ability and willingness of the civic authorities and townspeople to assimilate many of the migrants’ and the local voluntary organisations who ‘played a major part in happily settling new migrants in Australia’.46

Not everybody enthused about hosting a migrant centre or welcomed the growing migrant presence. Tom Mitchell, the state member for Benambra, was prepared to voice some of the concerns his constituents had expressed to him. Mitchell had preferred that the former army camp be redeveloped as a university campus, as had happened at Mildura, instead of becoming one of ‘Calwell’s concentration camps for war refugees’. He made representations for a separate school for Bonegilla children when Wodonga’s primary school doubled in size within three years and classes with up to 70 pupils spilt over into church halls. Mitchell’s unease could not be ignored but was not given any more attention in the local media than that of an occasional grumble.47 The pressures an influx of people placed on schools and hospitals were generally interpreted as the inconveniences associated with the Wodonga’s ambition of population growth. These problems were not, in the newspaper at least, attributed to the growing number of migrants.

There was no single local view of Bonegilla and post-war migration. As I indicated in my earlier piece, the evidence points to a mix of attitudes ranging through wariness, hostility, compassion, neighbourliness and indifference. By what can be gleaned from the local newspaper record, Wodonga and Albury, like Goulburn, initially offered limited hospitality. With longer-term intermingling, community attitudes shifted to mutual respect, neighbourly cooperation and even collaboration. The task facing the host society of taking in strangers became a matter of adding another five or so—and that involved adjustments both by the longer settled as well as by the newcomers.

**Remembering Bonegilla, 1971–2015**

During the 1970s and early 1980s, the Department of Defence demolished nearly all of the army huts at Bonegilla to make way for a new apprentice training school. Block 19 was saved from demolition
by migrant and local protesters who successfully lobbied to have it placed on the Register of the National Estate in 1990. Block 19 was subsequently placed on the Victorian Heritage Register in 2002 when the army transferred its ownership of the site to the state government. It was entered on to the Commonwealth government’s National Heritage List in 2007. A two-metre plinth, erected with the listing, proclaims the place to be ‘a symbol of post-war migration which transformed Australia’s economy, society and culture’. The listing itself looks beyond fabric and location to refer to the oral and written records associated with the site, for they ‘yield insights into post-war migration and refugee experiences’. It also says Bonegilla ‘represents the role of the host society’. Bonegilla is important to the nation, to ex-residents and to their hosts.  

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**Fig. 3** A needlework sampler and an enlarged photograph of two men walking down a flower-garden-fringed road at Bonegilla cleverly enticed visitors to enter an exhibition on migrant hostels at the National Archives of Australia in September 2014. The photograph was one of a series of 22 taken by Immigration Department publicity officers in 1965 to demonstrate how the centre was no longer a stark, former army camp. (Courtesy National Archives of Australia, NAA, A12111, 1/1965/22/1–22. This image provided by Amy Lay)

**Cultivating and Pruning Migrant Memory of Bonegilla**

Wodonga City Council now calls Block 19 Bonegilla the ‘Migrant Experience’. It is a memory place where people choose to come to tell their post-war migration stories. Nearly half the visitors are former
residents or their family members. They come as pilgrims to tell rather than be told. They leave personal or family stories and memorabilia as contributions to a larger story that this site tells, perpetuates, perhaps enshrines. They are not authorising tales of a homogeneous migrant experience but, to the contrary, seem to want to ensure that any story told is sufficiently differentiated to include their kind of migration. Their stories follow two general patterns: some dwell on the trials of migration and the inequities they faced; others have memories of kindness. Migration was a bitter/sweet experience, and settlement a challenge and achievement. Their stories reveal both trust in and suspicion of each other and the hosts.49

For many migrants, Bonegilla was a special place, a significant turning point in their autobiographies. Some have given personal or family heirlooms to the museum—for example, ‘my father’s overcoat’ or ‘the rug we took with us on the journey from our [European] home’. One couple, Ludwig and Milda Kritins, who had met and worked at the centre, bequeathed their wedding rings to the museum. One family requested soil from the site to go with their father’s coffin. Another family made a wake-like trip to Bonegilla after their father’s funeral to pay their respects to him.50 Family members shadow or adopt the memorable experiences passed on by Bonegilla forebears, taking particular notice of sensory impressions in what Marianne Hirsch calls post-memory.51 At Bonegilla personal memories seem to matter; the everyday is heritage worthy.

Former refugees and migrants writers, filmmakers and artists have prompted recall and shaped ideas about Bonegilla and post-war immigration. They have depicted ideas of Bonegilla in books, as memoirs of an individual or those of ethnic collectives or subsequent settlement suburb groups. They have crafted poems, radio and stage plays.52 Beyond Bonegilla, commercially successful films like Sophia Turkiewicz’s ‘Silver City’ (1984) and ‘Once My Mother’ (2014) or Richard Roxburgh’s ‘Romulus My Father’ (2007) traverse personal journeys that echo those in the memory records of the Bonegilla Collection and influence popular understandings of the more general migrant experience.

Within Albury–Wodonga, playwrights and sculptors have fostered remembering among ex-residents and locals. They have produced soundscapes, puppet shows, and exhibitions to draw public attention to migrant experiences. The children of ex-residents speak of the emotional
resonance of playing the parts of their parents carrying suitcases down the steps at the railway station in a community theatre production. At Bonegilla and in Wodonga, Ken Raff and Stephen Anderson have created evocative groups of two-dimensional steel-laser silhouette figures.

**Cultivating and Pruning Local Memory**

Given the isolation of Bonegilla, it is not surprising that migrant memory pieces rarely touch on the local community. The new arrivals recall creating their own support networks drawing on kith and kin or ship-board or former village acquaintanceship before they turned to the local community. Yet, for locals, community memory has to include Bonegilla as they try to come to grips with local space and understand the growing migrant presence as part of local economic, social and cultural development. Their curiosity is fired by a basic need to make sense of where and when they live. Theirs is an exploration of locality, rather than of nation or of a migratory self and family.

Dellios singles out the 1987 reunion and 1997 festival as significant turning points in the commemoration. She focuses appropriately on the actions of ex-residents working through the local branch of the Ethnic Communities Council in the reunion, and on the role of the museum in the festival. Without the imagination and energy of a few ex-residents and the collaboration of many more there would have been no commemoration. However, non-migrant and migrant locals, too, were heavily involved in creating, crafting, managing and championing memory of Bonegilla in the museum and at Block 19. That local advocacy took two forms initiated before and enduring beyond the 1987 reunion and a third, which came after it.

The *Border Morning Mail* was one of the first local bodies to explore memory of Bonegilla and its residents, publishing a four-part local history supplement, ‘The Immigrants,’ by Tony Wright in 1977. As the self-appointed custodian of local memory, the newspaper continued to prompt public remembering of Bonegilla after it had closed. Journalists, such as Howard Jones and Maria Galinovic, provided not only supplements to accompany commemorative events but, perhaps more influentially, a steady stream of ex-resident human-interest stories, centring most commonly on the resilience of ordinary people.

Second, the Albury–Wodonga Development Corporation was similarly early and consistent in promoting the commemoration
of Bonegilla. It had a bold place-making agenda, to which I return later. Accordingly its officers took up influential roles in community organisations. In 1983, Theo Charles-Jones, the community liaison officer, suggested a Bonegilla memorial. Later he convinced Wodonga Council to advance a memorial as a project to celebrate the Victorian bicentenary. Along with Bill Day, who was in charge of the local office of the Department of Immigration, and Louis Maroya, an ex-resident and local academic, Charles-Jones guided and supported the Ethnic Communities Council in its commemorative endeavours. He arranged for the Development Corporation to provide its mapping resources to prepare layout plans for the museum. He also pressed the Development Corporation to organise a 12-hectare land exchange for the proposed museum when the army ruled out the Block 19 site. At his suggestion, the Development Corporation advanced a commemorative museum cum ethnic village project as its highest priority in response to the call to local organisations for bicentennial projects.56

Part of Charles-Jones’s job was to establish new estate and broader town and district identity for marketing purposes. He recruited district histories and heritage surveys as he went about helping the Development Corporation to sell locations, not just sub-divided paddocks. Other officers, too, notably John Alker-Jones working with Albury Regional Museum and Parklands Albury–Wodonga, saw the memorialisation of Bonegilla as part of that broad place-making endeavour.

Third, the ambitious ten-day festival in 1997 originated with Elizabeth Close, the energetic and innovative director of Albury City Council’s newly professionalised museum. The festival was focused on the migrant experience and was intended to gather Bonegilla memories and memorabilia. Building on Close’s work, Albury Regional Museum arranged for a travelling exhibition, ‘The Steps of Bonegilla’, which visited Canberra and Melbourne, 2000–2003, where supplementary exhibition materials were gathered and displayed. Subsequently it arranged further exhibitions and a series of interviews with ex-residents for the Migration Heritage Centre’s on-line Belongings program.57 Through then beyond the 1990s, local museum professionals, with ex-resident collaboration, won a substantial museum and web presence for memories of Bonegilla.

It was simpler and quicker to commemorate Bonegilla within professionally tended museums than it was at an actual place on the ground. But after the successful 1997 festival attention moved beyond
the museum to place. The Department of Defence stopped using Block 19 and transferred not only the site but also its heritage responsibilities to the state with a successful nomination of the place to Victoria’s heritage list.

For the next decade responsibility for the care, management and presentation of Block 19 fell on local volunteers. Having established an Immigration Museum in Melbourne, Victorian premier Jeff Kennett decided Bonegilla might be best managed as a heritage place by the Department of Natural Resources. The department devolved conservation responsibility to Parklands Albury–Wodonga (Parklands), a not-for-profit, community-based organisation, initiated and financed by the Development Corporation with contributions from both local councils.

Parklands focused on facilitating community involvement in the conservation of the natural rather than the cultural environment. Its rangers were to manage carefully the physical condition of the 17.5 hectare Block 19 site. A master plan and interpretation strategy, developed by David Locke and Associates working with ex-resident informants, set directions for the development of Block 19 as a heritage place, but implementation was left to a Parklands sub-committee, which was a loosely coordinated group of local volunteers.

The task set the Parklands sub-committee was to care for the place, but its prime goal was to make the place visitable. Its members gathered funding opportunistically from heritage, arts and festival grants. Ahead of the 1999 Victorian election, local lobbyists had been successful in winning a promise of substantial state funding from John Pandazopolous, a leading politician who had family connections with Bonegilla. The promised $2 million commemoration centre and tourist venue was delivered in 2005 in the form of an interpretation pavilion and a new café. But Block 19 still remained unattended and its huts locked. John de Kruiff, an ex-resident volunteer, took on the role of being a regular unpaid site attendant and visitor guide in 2009. Plainly, the sub-committee could not achieve its goal without additional support. It struggled long and hard to convince Wodonga’s council to become the official custodian of Block 19.

A local volunteer successfully nominated the place to the National Heritage List at the end of 2007. Its inclusion on that list prompted new interest within Wodonga City Council. The mayor, Mark Byatt, had been
the chief executive officer of Destination Albury–Wodonga, the regional tourism office, and was keen to realise the tourism potential of the place. Council began to take over responsibility for the site from Parklands in 2009. It now administers the migrant centre site from within its tourism, marketing and cultural development department. With the help of Regional Development and Community Heritage Project funding in 2013–14, it has developed and is proceeding to implement new business, master and interpretation plans ‘to enrich the visitor experience in an authentic manner [and] to achieve a high level of self-sustainability with significant positive benefits to the Albury-Wodonga region’. Additional Commonwealth Heritage and Icons grants are being used to attend to conservation and interpretation needs. In all, the council is currently managing $1.5 million in project funding for Bonegilla from the state and the Commonwealth.

The influence individuals and small groups had on heritage-making can be discerned at a local level. I have named a few local champions. There were others. But not everybody enthused about the memorialisation of Block 19 Bonegilla as a heritage place, or about Wodonga City Council’s involvement. The Department of Defence wanted to demolish Block 19. It insisted, if Block 19 were to be kept, that interpretation include the military occupation of the site. Council was prepared to support tourist-attracting events but baulked at taking over caretaker responsibilities for a number of former army huts in need of costly maintenance. Graeme Crapp, the mayor, worried about the viability of a commemorative centre and tourism venue. ‘[Bonegilla] will never ever be a tourist asset for Wodonga and its value to Wodonga as a cultural asset is very dubious. Further, [many of the migrants] saw Bonegilla as a “Hell Hole” and did not want to talk about or think about the experience. If the state or Commonwealth governments thought Bonegilla was important, it was for them to care for it. Local government had other higher priorities.’

Others, too, baulked at associating a progressive Wodonga too closely with Bonegilla, for it was ‘an unhappy place’ and, therefore, part of a dark history.

Remembering or ignoring Block 19 Bonegilla had much to do with the kind of place locals wanted Wodonga to be.

Hurrah for Wodonga
The 1964 film Add another Five was, for a small shire council, an adventurous promotional piece. It was to precede three unusually high-
level place-promotion developments related not only to Wodonga but also more widely to the Albury–Wodonga district. Indeed, Wodonga was to become so well practised in proclaiming its merits that it caught the eye of Peter Carey, the novelist. In his novel, *Amnesia* (2014), Carey named a prosperous property developer ‘Woodey Townes’ and nicknamed him ‘Wodonga’, for the fictional Townes made his fortune from promoting a fictional ‘Greater Wodonga’.

First, Wodonga did not win the Premier Town competition in 1964, nor again in 1967. Still, citizen-group town promoters were pleased to refer to Wodonga as ‘Victoria’s Top Industrial Town’, a section winner in the competition. Irrespective of the contest, Victorian state planners designated Wodonga, with its Albury cross-border neighbour, as one of the state’s five key decentralisation projects in 1967, if New South Wales agreed to cooperate with a joint development. New South Wales did agree, and Wodonga–Albury development committees worked with the two councils and each state’s decentralisation authorities to win investment to the border district.

Second, Gough Whitlam pushed the idea of joint and rapid development of an Albury–Wodonga complex much further with his proposal for a Commonwealth-supported selective decentralisation project. In 1973 he set about developing Albury–Wodonga as ‘another Canberra’ between Melbourne and Sydney. The national growth centre project involved not only town planners and economists, but also promotions and public affairs staff. In essence, the newly labelled ‘Albury–Wodonga’ was a clever and particularly well-resourced branding exercise. $7.3 million was spent on place-marketing, spruiking the economic prospects, lifestyles and character of ‘Australia’s Growing Place’. The cross-border centre was culturally alive, and the Bonegilla memory place was fostered as part of that vitality, hence the heavy involvement of officers of the Albury–Wodonga Development Corporation and its related organisations in the promotion and management of Bonegilla.61

Third, when, in the mid-1990s, the growth centre experiment ended, the two cities were unbuckled from each other. Both councils went separate ways, each pursuing economic development apart from the other. Separate ideas about the city were important, and Wodonga appointed the first local government marketing officer in regional Victoria. The Rural City of Wodonga became the City of Wodonga, a
front-ranking Victorian regional centre in its own right. It was no longer the smaller struggle town ‘near Albury’.

The push for a stand-alone identity has recently been given impetus with opportunity to redevelop 10 hectares of prime land in the central business district following the re-siting of the railway in 2013. This provides a rare place-making opportunity; Wodonga is developing a new city heart. Central to the new development is the conserved Junction Place station and goods shed with a new urban park named Junction Square.

Forward-looking Wodonga was one of the last Victorian councils to formulate a heritage list, but council officers have looked to the past to fashion ideas of local character. Wodonga is still very much a work in progress, and Bonegilla, like Junction Place, is part of that work. The Bonegilla story helps distinguish Wodonga from other country centres. After all, it was Wodonga, nowhere else, that hosted Australia’s largest and longest-lasting post-war migrant reception centre. In spite of the naysayers, Bonegilla may still help bring ‘prestige, publicity, increased [tourism] investment and greater civic pride’, as in 1964. Bonegilla continues to play an important part in local place-making.

**Conclusion**

Local stories of post-war immigration do not displace national stories or migrant stories. They supplement them. As we move towards a big Australia and think more carefully about social cohesion, it seems important to assess the warmth of local cuddles. How did/do local communities go about taking in strangers? Ex-residents and their families might come to Bonegilla to seek ‘something that happened to me or my tribe’. Members of the local and wider host society might come to see ‘something done by me or my tribe’.62

With local government ownership of Block 19 Bonegilla, the people of Albury–Wodonga are showing their respect for those who once were strangers from other lands. They have accepted the responsibility of looking after a place that is important in migrant memory and is also deemed important to the nation. With Bonegilla, they project stories of togetherness and prompt attention to the care of the other. They are also telling stories about themselves and their place.

Migrant accommodation centres did not exist in a geographic vacuum. Nor do the memory places that have been built around them. Here, I have heeded Jean Martin’s call for examinations of particular
social settings in which the immigrant and the native-born adapted to each other. It is for others to show how other local communities in this migrant nation recall and think about what it meant, and still means, to add another five or so.
Notes
1 ‘Promotion General’ file, Box 13, Wodonga City Council Archive.
2 *A World for Children* (c. 1962); *Arriving in Australia* (c. 1962), National Film & Sound Archive, Canberra.
3 *Border Morning Mail* (BMM), 27 January 1965.
5 BMM, 17 November 1965.


Goodall, pp. 10–12.

Goodall, pp. 12–13.


Census, Australia, 1971, Collector district returns.

BMM, 28 May 1949.


BMM, 9 September 1949; 9 May and 4 July 1957.

BMM, 18 September 1951.


Olga Leschen, social worker, 5 April 1960, A12799/111, NAA.

‘Assimilation’, A2567, 1961/69, NAA.

Kershaw to Secretary Department of Immigration, 10 August 1959, ‘Assimilation’, A2567, 1961/69, NAA.

‘Promotion General’ file, Box 13, Wodonga City Council Archive.

BMM, 10 and 24 December 1947; 17 February 1951.


Database and donor information files, Bonegilla Collection, Albury Library-Museum.

Interview, Bernadette Zanet, 2013.


Murray River Performing Group, ‘So Much Sky’; Interview, Maria Quaglio, 2013.


Dellios, pp. 7–14.


Correspondence, Australian Heritage Commission to Department of Defence, 12 December 1989, 2/8/246/4, Department of Environment, Canberra.

Interviews, Graeme Crapp, 2008 and 2015.


Martin, pp. 101–02.