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# So you want to do a PhD?

*By David Cameron*

You know your life has taken a turn to the more bizarre when you wake in the middle of the night, your mind working over some twisted historical insight or perhaps a statistical series. You roll over, chiding yourself for carrying on this debate in your sleep while you should be dreaming about much nicer things. Welcome to the weary world of doctoral research. Having been asked to write a word or two about my research and the experience of working on a PhD thesis I was a bit unsure about where to start and how to write it up without boring the poor reader to tears, or worse, scarring them off postgraduate study altogether. My journey along the road to historical 'glory' began back in 1990 as the result of an industrial accident at the soon to be scrapped Newcastle steelworks. A chance word from my sister about the Open Foundation Course for mature age students at the University of Newcastle and I suddenly found myself with a good TER score and place in an Arts degree in 1991. My existing interest in history quickly transformed into a passion for historical knowledge and research. Powered by a "succeed or its off to the scrap heap" determination, I emerged from four years of hard graft with, much to my surprise, a 1st Class Hons Degree, and less surprising, a deep desire to pursue a life historical learning. With vague ideas about securing a PhD and perhaps a career in the academy, or into the public service, I came back to Brisbane to begin my doctoral research in March 1995.

## The Question

Apparently its the question asked, rather than the answer given, that wins so many Nobel prizes. I don't think my question is in that league but it is nonetheless true that the question or topic itself is the most important ingredient to the thesis. All the research in the world won't help if you don't have a question directing the research task. My topic slowly evolved out of an interest in the contrast between labour movement attitudes regarding the role of the State in directing economic development (especially the fostering of secondary industries) apparent in NSW and Queensland earlier in this century. This contrast led me to devise a research topic that would explore the relationships between economic development, industrialisation, urbanisation, and rurality in the political economy of Queensland. Essentially I wanted to know why the labour movement in Queensland more or less consistently rejected industrialisation/urbanisation in favour of a the mythical agrarian utopia. This was as much a question of ideological preference as it was a response to Queensland's existing economic geography. My honours thesis research into the establishment of a large State government dockyard and engineering works by the McGowen Labor government in Newcastle, just prior to the Great War, has demonstrated that the labour movement there had adopted a dual strategy of rural and industrial development. The labourists in NSW were happy to seek out their version of antipodean modernity with a simultaneous drive for rural and urban industrial development. This was not the case in Queensland. Why were the southern Laborites happy to indulge both the rural and urban dreams and their northern cousins almost entirely reject industrialisation and urban society? Certainly their economic histories differ and the urbanisation of Queensland was less intense than it was down south. A

large part of the answer must lie within the economic history of Queensland. Here was my starting point.

### The research task:

The first task I had to undertake was to get up to speed on Queensland historiography, particularly its economic history. Of course I had begun reading up on Queensland history as soon as my honours thesis was submitted. Very quickly it became clear that body of research into Queensland's secondary industries was less than comprehensive, and more critically, detailed examples of Queensland's economic history were all too rare. In terms of the large gaps in the historiography concerning secondary industries this was both an advantage and disadvantage. It was an advantage in the sense that I would be tilling new ground, which enhances the significance of the research itself and also offers the opportunity of exploring new and varied sources. One disadvantage, however, arises from not having a strong base of economic historiography from which to broadly assess industrialisation and the development of the manufacturing sector in Queensland. Certainly economic issues have been addressed in many Queensland studies, however, a detailed and coherent sense of its economic development is sadly absent.

Initially I targeted my research on the development of secondary industries in Queensland (between 1900-1930) and how this was influenced by social formation (demographic patterns, class, gender etc) and the temper of labour politics in the political economy. As I progressed it became clear that in order to critically analyse these questions I first had to build up a coherent understanding of Queensland's economic development. In essence this required that I research and write an economic history of Queensland for the period of my study. Moreover this necessitated research into nineteenth century economic history to provide the historical context from which my period could be assessed and interpreted. As the research task broadened, so too did my understanding of Queensland's economic history and its place in Australian and global economic and political relations. The research task began to change in direction and dimensions. This led to intensive research into the primary and tertiary sectors of the economy. The beast was getting bigger.

With this shift in focus another problem arose. While I wanted to maintain my focus on the labour movement's attitudes to economic development it was also crucial that I assess the political economy from all sides of the political spectrum. This, of course, involved researching the attitudes of employer and employee organisations alike. Delving into the documents of the various employer, industry and citizens groups opened up new avenues for understanding what people believed was in Queensland's best interests economically and the degrees to which the state should be involved in shaping economic development. What struck me was the broad consensus of opinion in favour of rural development at all costs, this I call the rural developmental ethos that dominated Queensland's political economy. The only obvious tensions inherent within this developmental ethos arose from the competing agrarian and pastoral ideals. These tensions dominated the political economy, and politics generally, as the pastoral based political elite were increasingly challenged by town and country liberals and organised labour, both espoused a similarly strong belief in closer settlement and the ultimate goal of an agrarian society dominated by a liberal democratic yeomanry class. Herein lies the link between the purely materialist motivations and the ideological. It is clear that the economic assessment must

encompass an ideological perspective. One cannot exist without the other. The loci for such an analysis can be found where they most clearly interact, in the political sphere.

### The Sources:

The secondary sources have proved quite valuable despite their limitations and I need not go into them in any detail here. Perhaps the most important works consulted would be the economic histories by Glen Lewis, Allan Loughheed and John Lavery. Queensland's political history is well served by the large body of work compiled by the late Denis Murphy and his associates, as well as Ross Fitzgerald and Harold Thornton, Charles Bernays, Colin Hughes, and Ken Wiltshire to name but a few. Some good general histories of Queensland have been written by Ross Johnston and Ross Fitzgerald and they provide many research leads to follow.

The primary sources I have consulted are as varied as they are vast, but they can be classified into three main groups. First are the official state and federal government publications, the QPD, QPP (with its wealth of departmental reports), the Industrial Gazette, Government Gazette, Censuses, and the Queensland Statistics. The latter has been extremely important to the empirical base of my research and I have built up a large statistical database from which I draw many of my interpretations of dynamics of Queensland's economy. The body of government material gives one an insight into government, departmental and individual attitudes and action regarding economic issues. This is the centre of the analysis of the political economy. The second group comprises political parties, unions, employer groups, industry bodies, and citizens groups. These sources are mostly annual reports, minutes of meetings, conferences, and correspondence. Much of this material was found in the State, Australian and local archives (including a lot of departmental correspondence and unpublished reports and so on). The third group encompasses the Queensland and interstate press. The press provides loads of information on all of the above and is a useful source of 'public' opinion although one must be cautious of the biases of particular papers. What is said in the "Worker" is very different to that in the "Brisbane Courier" for example.

### Getting it all together:

I cannot stress enough the importance of adopting a logical and efficient method of compiling and filing the masses of material you will inevitably pull together. Some system of collating and referencing all your material is essential, particularly when it comes to the writing up stage. Ideally you want a system that will allow you to quickly access as much of the evidence as is practicable. In my case I have opted for a virtual digitalisation of my sources onto two databases, statistical and textual. I have, of course, the vast majority of my material filed away in hard copy, although a lot of what I have sourced has gone straight onto my database when it is brief enough or the material cannot be copied in some other way. With a strict regime of backing up files, and some off-site storage of backup disks, the risk of losing all your work in some cataclysmic event (magnetic or just your plain old house fire) are reduced as much as is humanly possible. My particular system is nothing more than a digital version of the paper notecard system only much, much better. The speed, accuracy and depth with which you can access your sources is astonishing. It is not only more efficient but more accurate and you will never lose track of where that juicy tid bit came from.

What's more the database operates alongside your word-processor, it can automatically place, and correctly and consistently format your footnotes, and compile and print your bibliography. The enhanced quality of your finished thesis aside, perhaps one of the great pluses with this is in the gains made from effective time management.

A bit of organisation pays off in the amount of work you can actually achieve, and more importantly, it gives you some of your life back to pursue those other human interests (family, friends, social life etc). If you stick to your research plan as much as is possible, adopt the 'its my full-time job' attitude, and apply a bit of self-discipline, you can keep the beast well within your control (well, at least most of the time). Having worked for over a decade in the 'real' world prior to my stint at university (and having regularly worked long hours and shiftwork), maintaining a forty hour thesis working week (plus overtime when necessary) is no great burden if you treat your research for what it is; a job. I think it is worth remembering that while your thesis is one of the most important things in your life, it is not *the* most important thing. The upshot of all this is that thesis research is hard graft, but it need not, indeed it should not, be torture. Some planning, goal setting, organisation, effective time management, and meeting deadlines make life that bit easier (and are basic life and workplace skills) and hopefully the results of your labours more satisfying. Ultimately, taking on a research thesis is perhaps the one time in your life when you will be able to experience that rarest of opportunities to indulge your historical imagination and passion for such an extended period and to be immersed in your chosen field for no other reason than for the sheer pleasure of it. Dig deep, take a long draught and enjoy.