

LOCAL HISTORY: WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON NEWSPAPERS AS A HISTORICAL SOURCE.

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Before reconstructing a local history, it is necessary to determine whether sufficient and relevant source material is available. When researching a specific local history archival resource material must be examined. Secondary sources usually provide the broad framework for a specific local history. The researcher also needs to use the less familiar material available to the local historian. One of the most valuable sources is the local newspaper which reports on a regular basis on all spheres of a specific community. Advertisements, which appear in these newspapers can also be sources of information. This paper will address the value of especially the local newspaper as an irreplaceable source in the reconstruction of local history.

In the introduction to the publication *Historiografie: vijftientwintig eeuwen gesciedskrijving van West - Europa*, Regionale De Schryver, professor of history at the University of Leuven, commented on the enormous scope, immense diversity, versatility and complexity that characterise history as a discipline.¹ The South African historian FA van Jaarsveld argued that the basis of history is pluralistic by nature because of the multitude of themes and topics that could be studied by means of various methods, giving history its multidimensional character.² Local history is but one of these dimensions.

Because of local history's own diversity and variety, it is problematic to describe this subsection of the discipline by means of a single definition. When some definitions of the term local history are taken into consideration, the possible content, value and purpose might be articulated. In the 1974 *Urban yearbook*, local history is defined as: 'the study of man's past in relation to his locality, being determined by an individual's interest and experience.'³

The South Africa historian J.W. Kew of the University of South Africa described it as:... the history of a town, district or any unity smaller than the nation-state, with clearly defined territorial limits or in which inhabitants are so far united in thought and action as to feel a sense of belonging together.⁴

The English local historian WG Hoskins referred to the writing of local history as 'a historical study of the origins, growth, the long period of stability, and perhaps the subsequent disintegration of a particular community.'⁵ In the Introduction to the publication, On doing local history, the American local historian, Carrol Kammen states that the subject history is in the public domain and that its content is regularly quoted by people such as politicians, journalists, orators and preachers, who are not necessarily historians. According to her it seems that history is accessible to anyone who has time and interest to invest in it. She is also of the opinion that of all histories, local history is the most accessible, because 'it is closest to home.'⁶ Kammen defined local history as:

...the study of past events, or of people or groups in a given geographic area - a study based on a wide variety of documentary evidence and placed in a comparative context that should be both regional and national.⁷

The South African historian and one of the pioneers of local history writing, CC Eloff, maintained that via local history you meet the ordinary man at his doorstep, where he comes alive and is no longer just a pawn on the chessboard of national history.⁸ The authors of the publication, Nearby history Exploring the past around you, use the term 'nearby history' because according to them it includes the entire range of possibilities in a person's immediate environment. At the same time it indicates that the material which is to be referred to will be 'an inclusive history' because the various elements, resources, research methods, questions and insights often overlap.⁹ To substantiate this view they quote William Shakespeare: 'There is a history in all men's lives,' and explains that this observation is true to all men; plumbers and presidents, printers and prime ministers.¹⁰ From the above the conclusion can be drawn that local history is a 'total history' as it does not only deal with the ruling elite, thus a political history from above, but includes ordinary people and covers the full spectrum of a community's activities.

In historical studies local history occupies a position below that of a national history but above the level of a family history.¹¹ James H. Conrad, the archivist and coordinator of oral history at the James G. Gee Library at the East Texas State University, describes the subject matter of local history as a rubric which covers a wide spectrum of topics associated with a county (district) city, individual and family. It includes any activity, event and individual which might be part of the local community's domain.¹² As a genre, local history embraces the political, social, economical, cultural, religious and intellectual aspects of a specific community. According to SS Sprague of Morehead State University in Kentucky, local history has an immediacy which a national history lacks.

To explain this statement he refers to the New Deal of the 1930s in the USA and states that when the New Deal is observed as a local history as captured in the history of buildings erected in the 1930s and which are still in use, it is no longer endless statistics reflecting the unemployed and state expenditure. It becomes human, concrete and understandable.¹³ National and international history deals to a great extent with political, diplomatic and military issues of the world. But it is not only the history of the elite and statesmen that should be researched and studied, but also that of ordinary people and how major and minor events impacted on their lives. Local history therefore provides adequate opportunities for researching, writing and teaching history and should be considered a challenge to both professional and amateur historians.

Sprague also pointed out that 'local history wears many faces' and that the subject-range of a local history can only be limited by the lack of curiosity and imagination of the researcher or local historian. When researching and studying a specific local history a variety of new and interesting themes could be revealed to the researcher.¹⁴ The content of local history may range from a general chronological account of a specific place's history to a more specific anecdote emphasising aspects such as the architecture, the necessities or amenities of life, and the traditions of a specific community.

As is the case with any historical writing, local history needs to be properly and scientifically researched and analysed to enable the author to reconstruct a truthful account of the past of a specific city, suburb, town, village, township or informal settlement. Before embarking on such a reconstruction, it is necessary to determine whether sufficient, relevant and accessible source materials are available. Should the available source material be inadequate, the eventual account of a specific local history could be superficial and distorted.

'Everything that men and women have written, touched, or made is a clue to the past.'¹⁵ This is but one way of describing the wide range of source materials available to the local historian. When researching local history, the historian needs to consult the usual primary sources that can be found in archives and secondary sources such as general histories, biographies and scholarly works. It is however of great importance that the researcher should also investigate the less familiar and less frequently used source materials.¹⁶ The number of historical sources available to the local historian is equal to the 'many faces local history wears' and capturing this information can be just as

exciting as the eventual reconstruction of a specific community's past.

National and general histories, encyclopaedias, atlases, subject dictionaries and indexes provide the broad framework from where research into the history of a specific place can start. Yearbooks, calendars and chronologies contain relevant information regarding the national political, social, economic and cultural trends which probably had a bearing on the origin and development and /or decline of a specific community.¹⁷ Once the basic research is done, the local historian needs to turn to 'other' source material.

A valuable source, when 'doing local history,' is census records. These records give complete accounts of the inhabitants of a specific place at a specific date, as they depict information regarding each and every household, ranging from the size of the household, to the head of the household and the type of fuel used for heating. Although these records might contain antiquarian and outdated detail, the information could nevertheless be of sociological importance to the local historian; it could, for instance, indicate interrelationships that might exist among village families. Other documents that could be used concurrently with census records and contribute to a more complete picture of a specific community are church registers of baptisms, marriages and burials, and even tax returns.¹⁸

'Time and space are related not only in Einstein's theories, but in the everyday work of historians and geographers.'¹⁹ Regional, local, city or town maps are of the greatest value and importance to the local historian, as they display the growth, change and even the decline which took place in specific localities. To give a complete and specific picture of a community the local historian might even need to compile a composite map from old maps available.²⁰ In this same category are city, town and village plans, which also give an indication of the growth and development of a specific place.

One of the less familiar sources that can be consulted is local directories, as they contain information on the size of the town or city and its principal inhabitants, tradesmen and craftsmen at specific times. Directories are usually revised annually. These local directories can also reveal a partial picture of the social and occupational structure of a place during a certain period of time.²¹ Kyvig and Marty, however also point out that should directories and census records be compared it may appear that the directories mainly reflect information about middle and upper class residents, but offer a limited picture of the lower economic groups.²²

Reminiscences, whether printed or verbal, must never be overlooked as a very valuable source of information. These reminiscences, however, require checking at every point, because people's memories are notoriously faulty. Oral testimonies should be tested just as rigorously as any written evidence to determine their authenticity.²³ When reconstructing the past of places in South Africa, oral testimonies will be very important. There is also a great need to document South African oral traditions before they are lost forever, denying the Rainbow Nation valuable knowledge about its numerous and colourful roots.

When writing a local history the informative value of the newspaper in general and specifically that of the local newspaper should never be overlooked. It is one of the most valuable sources of local history. Obviously it is more likely that these newspapers might appear mostly in the larger cities and towns and might also carry international and national news, but there are also newspapers which appear in towns, villages and specific regions or suburbs of a specific city. The *Rekord*, *Laudium Sun* and *Tshwane Sun* are examples of such local newspapers which cover a wide spectrum of local history of the city of Tshwane. Furthermore there are publications which only cover events of and information on individuals living in a specific suburb or are members of a specific Church community or social club. These would include 'local newspapers' such as 'Uit die perd se bek' ('From the horse's mouth') the official publication of the home owners' association and 'Family News', the newsletter of the Hatfield Christian Church in Waterkloof Glen, Pretoria.

The local newspapers mentioned, are published on a weekly or monthly basis and they report on the political, social, economic and cultural activities of specific communities. They capture the habits, everyday local events, and a vast array of personal news items such as the joys and sorrows of individuals within a community. These newspapers report on the local leadership, be it political, cultural or sport as well as on local villains. Most of these persons could be people whose names would seldom appear in the national and international media. For the writing of the political history of a specific place the information captured in the local paper is indispensable, because it would deal with party-politics at grassroots level and not at national level and will most probably deal with the bread and butter issues of that specific area. Apart from the articles on individuals, obituary columns should not be overlooked, as some of them could be mini biographies. In the local newspaper the physical development of a locality will be captured in the news regarding the surveying of suburbs, extensions, new roads,

highways and commercial centres. The effect of these developments as well as the reaction of the community, will be portrayed in the local newspaper. Complete histories of constructions could be found in these local publications; the planning, the progress in building completion, disasters and even the demolishing of these structures will be recorded. Most of the time complete 'histories' will not be found in a single edition, it may not always be front page news, but may be scattered throughout various editions.²⁴ Apart from providing the researcher with quite detailed information on developments in and around a community these local publications could also portray attitudes towards many features within a specific community. In these newspapers the researcher will also find valuable topographic information on cities, towns and villages.²⁵

Very rich, informative and enlightening sections of local publications are the advertisements. These could yield a good portion of a community's history, because here the researcher will find reference to, amongst others, religious groups, ethnic organizations, education societies, style of dress and connoisseur preferences of a specific community. The real estate section opens a totally new field to the local historian and provides the researcher with social-economic data applicable to a specific community. By studying columns on employment a good idea of the general career framework and employment needs of a specific community can be deduced.²⁶ Referring to the specific advertisement section as well as general advertisements which appear in local newspapers, circumstantial evidence about life in a city, suburb, town or village can be perceived.²⁷ The researcher must however also keep the limitations of advertisements in mind. Although the advertisements provide information regarding a specific community, there is always information left out and a section of the community, often the illiterate, the poor, the pitied and downtrodden, is ignored and hardly ever represented by the advertisers.²⁸

Another interesting and informative section of the local newspaper is 'Letters to the Editor'. Here useful occasional reports of local events as well as personal accounts of local events and responses to events, personalities and structures can be found. The researcher should however keep in mind that these commentaries are mostly subjective and tend to be biased and should not be treated as the only valid public opinions on specific matters.²⁹

Gathering information from newspapers requires a great deal of patience, dedication and discipline. Thomas E Felt comments as follows on this issue: 'If the enjoyment of newspapers is easy, the intelligent use of them as a historical source is not.' He points

out a few basic points to keep in mind when using the local newspaper as historical source material. In the first place the researcher needs to understand the particular newspaper and take into consideration the specific community it serves. It should also be kept in mind that a newspaper is about business and that revenue only partially comes from sales or subscribers, it comes mainly from advertising.³⁰ As in the case with any other historical source material, the researcher needs to apply internal and external criticism to determine whether the information captured by a local newspaper is truthful and reliable. Another danger, when working through newspapers is that the researcher can be easily sidetracked because of the multitude of topics covered by these publications.³¹ The researcher therefore needs to know exactly what to explore, and must be disciplined enough to stick to it.

Thus, apart from the usual documents found in archives and secondary sources the local historian also needs to refer to the less used source material such as census records directories, maps and local newspapers. There are of course also other primary sources such as letters, diaries and memoirs, which might be found either in archives or in private possession which are not referred to in this paper. The local newspaper should however never be disregarded. It is one of the most informative, interesting and exciting sources available to the local history researcher and historian.

ENDNOTES

- 1 R. De Schryver, Historiografie Vijfentwintig eeuwen geschiedschrijving van West-Europa, p. 365.
- 2 Van Jaarsveld, Moderne geskiedskrywing Opstelle oor 'n nuwe benadering tot geskiedenis, p. 1.
- 3 Urban Yearbook 1974, pp. 4 - 5.
- 4 C.C. Eloff, 'Aspekte van plaaslike en streek-geskiedenis: Teorie en praktyk', *Contree*, (35), Junie 1994, p. 12.
- 5 W.G. Hoskins, 1972. Local History in England, Second edition, p. 263. C Kammen, 1988. On Doing Local History Reflections on what local historians do, why, and what it means, Nashville, Tennessee: The American Association for State and Local History, Second printing, p. 4.
- 6 C. Kammen, On Doing Local History, p.1.
- 7 Ibid., pp. 4 - 5.
- 8 Eloff, "Aspekte van plaaslike en streek-geskiedenis," p. 12. (Freely translated.)
- 9 D.E. Kyvig and M.A. Marty, 1983. Nearby History Exploring the past around you, Nashville Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, second printing, pp. 4 and 5.

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- 10 Ibid., p.6.
- 11 A. Rogers, 1977, Approaches to local history, London and New York: Longmans, Second edition, p. 1.
- 12 J.M. Conrad, 1989. Developing local history programs in community libraries, Chicago and London: American Library Association, p. 1.
- 13 S.S. Sprague, 'The Many Faces of Local History', *Historian*, (55), Summer 1993, p. 814.
- 14 Ibid., pp. 815, 817 + 818. He refers to how his own research on the origins of Middlesboro, Kentucky's largest iron and coal town, resulted in information about 125 such towns and eventually led to the two publications: *Investing Appalachia: the Virginia Valley boom of 1889 - 1893* in 1975 and *The great Appalachian iron and coal boom of 1889 - 1893* in 1977.
- 15 Kammen, On Doing Local History, p. 43.
- 16 J.C. Pretorius, 'Inwinning van inligting' *Navorsing in die Kultuurhistoriese Museum*, 1 (4), 1987, pp. 92 -94.
- 17 G.M. Hibbins, C. Fahey, M.R. Askew, Local History A Handbook for Enthusiasts, pp. 5 - 7.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 34 -36.
- 19 T.E. Felt, 1979. Researching, writing, and publishing local history, Nashville: American Association for state and local history, p. 39.
- 20 Ibid., pp. 41 - 42.
- 21 Hoskins, Local History in England, p. 33.
- 22 Kyvig and Marty, Nearby history, p. 73.
- 23 Hoskins Local History in England, p. 39.
- 24 Kyvig and Marty, Nearby history, p. 66.
- 25 Hoskins, Local History in England, pp. 36 and 38.
- 26 J.Cumming, (No Date) A guide for the writing of local history, p. 22, Rodgers, Approaches ti local history, p. 72, Kyvig and Marty, Nearby history, p. 64.
- 27 Kammen, On Doing Local History, p. 61.
- 28 Felt, Researching, writing, and publishing local history, p. 21.
- 29 Ibid., p. 23.
- 30 Ibid., p. 20.
- 31 Kammen, On Doing Local History, p. 61. Hoskins, Local History in England, p.39.