10 Epilogue: Looking forward, looking back

There is a certain poignancy in the title for this epilogue. Daniel Gordon Kirkpatrick, a farm boy from Nulla Nulla, NSW, born in 1927 and better known as country musician Slim Dusty, used it as the title of his last recording before his death in 2003. His life covered the time span between the apogee of rural settlement of Australia – about the time when South Australia's rural population reached its maximum – to the beginning of the cyber-age and the dismantling of much of the structure that had supported Australian primary production, along with the traditional culture that had developed around it. In its own way, his music told country Australia's story as he saw it. Though born eight years later, for almost half a century I too have had the privilege of studying, learning and researching about the people of rural Australia over a good part of this massive transition. Springing from rural roots myself – though from a very different rural culture – this endeavour has brought its own reward, always with the hope that my work could, in return, produce results of some benefit to the people studied, their culture and communities.

A large part of the motivation for producing this work near the close of my career has been to ensure that not only published material but various unpublished reports I have done, many of them at the request of different local government bodies, are gathered together between two covers along with more recent ongoing work. The aim is to provide a consolidated and hopefully co-ordinated record of what has happened to one State's rural society since the end of the 'Long Boom'. As a geographer's specifically and deliberately spatially oriented contribution, it seeks to provide a perspective complementary to the many excellent historical, economic and sociological accounts of the same period. If it survives, it may also serve as a partial historical geography of the period. So much for looking back; as to looking forward, I hope that the findings and methodology of this thesis may be considered as a framework for action in South Australian rural planning. They should also act as a basis for extension of this approach (with appropriate modifications) both into the future and into other States.

Examining the balance sheet

The journey out and back: fulfilment of goals?

I set out in this work to bring together the macro-theory at the root of economic rationalism, globalisation and neo-liberalism as the exogenous motors for change, and identity formation, place-making and the forces that tie people to place as the endogenous locus of resistance. Then I sought to capture the essence of the social organisation of rural space in cartographic form prior to the rural crisis decade, whose development and impact I then sought to chronicle. Following this, I examined the outcome of the fateful ten years, with its clash between globalising imperatives and local resilience, for rural people and communities. I established a number of trends which subsequent field research proved to have continued after the crisis eased from about 1995. My conclusion was that while many – perhaps most – of the small rural communities would survive at something close to their present status (and all should be given the *chance* to do so), many others might decline to a lower status before stabilising. Thus in order to achieve stability in the total rural system at a higher scale

of resolution, it would be necessary for the planned 'unit of survival' to move up to a broader level, called "regional". Throughout, I have picked up the differences between the three age-of-settlement zones; due to rural dilution in the core and intermediate zones, the newest-settled zone now is the main repository of residual rural values. I pointed to the need to conserve the deep sense of belonging and identity in the 80-90 smallish place-specific rural communities that occupy the State's settled areas, but simultaneously to build on the existing nascent trends for the deep seated localism to become more inclusive, co-operative and upwardly mobile to embrace the regional level. Only in this way, I argued, could regional development for the people of the region really work, within firm boundaries that actually mean something to their inhabitants, and supported by a fusion of local economic development boards and local government within the same boundaries. I pointed to a system of regions that broadly fit the social and business contact networks established in the earlier chapters. It is for the reader to judge to what extent these endeavours have been successful.

Geography and the spatial focus

My reasons for the strongly spatial focus in this approach are twofold. First, I believe that a geographer steeped in the spatial tradition has an obligation to make use of it in contributing to a debate that has such serious consequences for our national heritage. Despite poststructuralism, postmodernism and the cultural turn, understanding spatial distributions is a fundamental attribute of geography as a discipline, and one that provides a perspective still at best dimly appreciated in other disciplines. Daniela Stehlik, for example, (2001,31) remarks that "The concept of "space" is too little developed, and rarely given serious consideration, within traditional sociological literature". Her conclusion to the same paper I repeat below, because it accords so closely to my purpose in producing this thesis that I cannot improve on her words.

> Just as it took a generation of social scientists to accept the validity of gender as a variable, I expect it to be a similar hard slog in the case of space. … Those of us working as researchers in regional/rural settings in Australia need to maintain our awareness of place, of landscape and of identity. We need to recognise just how important meanings of place are to people and not to just dismiss those meanings in a structural analysis which denies their own expectations and their own narratives. As sociologists, we need to be open to fluid borders and possible crossings of discipline boundaries in our endeavour to enable Australia to maintain a sustainable future, one where small communities remain essential to the mosaic of everyday life and practice. (Stehlik 2001, 41)

My second reason follows closely on the first. In reading around this topic for many years, I have very rarely come across empirical studies that actually try to provide a geography of *social* interaction seen (as far as representation makes possible) through country people's eyes, on any more than a specific local case-study scale. Many writers indicate, though often vaguely and in principle, the spatial elements that I have here tried to capture empirically: namely the interlocking, hierarchical way in which territorially based, socially-defined groups actually occupy space, at various levels. To illustrate, at community level, Cheers and Luloff (2001), following Wilkinson (1991) regard a community as consisting of locality, local society and community field. Locality they define (p. 130) as

> … a particular geographic territory demarcated by locally agreed upon boundaries. Community boundaries are dynamic in that they are created, and continually recreated, by the interactions and perceptions of local people as they go about their daily lives.

Local society is "the networks created by the various formal and informal associations in the community". But no actual examples are given of such "agreed-upon" boundaries. And at the regional level, the Commonwealth's 'Time running out' Report lists reasons why a regional policy is necessary, then says:

> The Committee considers it imperative that geographical or administrative boundaries do not constrain consideration of these issues. The report therefore considers 'regions' as the combination of communities, business and industry that constitute an economically and socially viable unit. (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2000, 2)

As I see it, I have sought to reduce this vagueness by the explicit concentration throughout this work on tying down place-making and community identity to terra firma, in the mapping of the way social formations (neighbourhoods, communities, social regions and linked clusters) actually occupy rural space – and then, hopefully, adding a little to the understanding of how they work. Among recent studies and suggestions for regionalisation methodology known to me, only that of Brunckhorst, Coop and Reeve (2004) is armed with a geography of social identification; for which they are to be congratulated. However, adoption of their solution would mean a *tabula rasa* redrafting of the local government structure in New South Wales, and starting almost from scratch in building local social capital within a brand new spatial framework. I need next to deal with a number of anticipated criticisms of my own approach.

Conceptualisation of space and place: naïve and dated/ practical and relevant?

On the question of my conception of space and place, my thinking in this work remains much influenced by the work of Robert Sack, and also Entrikin (1991). Sack (1980) sees the domain of social science as overlapping the physical science (objective) and artistic (subjective) domains. As he notes (p.13) "Even though it is often misapplied, action by contact is the basis of the concept of space in the social sciences". More recently Sack (2003,75) insists that physical space has a reality independent of our mental or linguistic construction of it. For Sack, space is the medium in which place functions as an *essential* intermediary between the three domains of reality (the empirical, the moral and the aesthetic), weaving them together in the likeness of a loom. The weaving is partly but not entirely imposed on the individual by his/her situatedness within reality, leaving a role for agency and exercise of choice and free will[1]. Entrikin likewise, in his discussion of the "betweenness" of place, points out that the concept of place lies between the subjective and the objective, the existential and the concrete, so that the geographer may quite possibly construct place in a different way to the individuals who live there (Entrikin 1991, 13). He suggests that geographers try to recognise objectiveness and

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[1] However, in Chapter 4 I concentrate on the factors that combine to create places out of neutral space, rather than on the integrative role of place itself as an agent or catalyst shaping reality.

subjectiveness, and place themselves in a position in between them. Thus he writes "the geographer typically makes a self-conscious attempt to draw these poles apart, and to occupy a relatively objective position between those of the agent and the theoretician". (Entrikin 1991, 26). As with the work of Sack, this is consistent with a realist position, and is exactly the approach I have taken in this study.

It may well be objected that these concepts of space and place seem to take little account of the recent developments in social thought, including recognition of the social production (and construction) of space, the voluntarism and purposiveness of construction of community, place and neighbourhood, the rapid expansion of non-territorially based forms of interaction, and much more. Is what I have written merely grounded in nostalgia? Is it a historical geography of a bygone era, using equally historical outmoded methodology? I think not. However, I do not mean to negate the importance of the advance, nuances, and expansion of the space concept that have come from recent work in cultural geography, sociology and post-structuralist thinking. Such extensions involve considerable intellectual sophistication and stimulation. My contention is however that they add to, but do not (and must not) *replace* a grounded understanding of what is empirically discernible in the real landscape. In this work I have, metaphorically, operated at sea-level level rather than in the middle stratosphere, because that is where convincing information that can form the basis for vital political decisions must be anchored. It is ironic that just when we have acquired the tools through GIS, remote sensing, expert systems and so on to really boost our understanding of what goes on at the earth's surface, many human geographers have lost interest and taken their eye off this particular ball.

I expect also to be criticised for not taking into account the explosion of communication mobility and space-time compression, leaving me with a naïve and outdated concept of the *sense* of place. Such criticism, I anticipate, may flow particularly from the cosmopolitan, metropolitan-based life-worlds of many eminent geographers, which threaten to remove them so far from the social world of ordinary rural people as to render the former little able to empathise with the latter's situation. Thus Doreen Massey (1994), in her influential paper "A global sense of place" refers to time-space compression as destructive of traditional notions of space, leading to the argument that

> The search for the 'real' meanings of place – the unearthing of heritages and so forth – is interpreted as being, in part, a response to desire for fixity and for identity in the middle of all the movement and change. A sense of place, of rootedness, can provide – in this form and on this interpretation – stability and a source of unproblematic identity. In that guise, however, place and the spatially local are foci for a form of romanticised escapism from the real business of the world. While 'time' is equated with movement and progress, 'space/place' is equated with stasis and reaction.

Massey does not totally support this view, but later, and equally important in the present context, she argues

> A particular problem with this conception of place is that it seems to require the drawing of boundaries. Geographers have long been exercised by the problem of defining regions, and this question of 'definition' has almost always been reduced to the issue of drawing lines around a place. … But that kind of boundary around an

area precisely distinguishes between an inside and an outside. It can so easily be yet another way of constructing a counterposition between 'us' and 'them'.

These are telling arguments. But how would the drawing or absence of a boundary affect the 'us and them' phenomenon, one way or the other? There is no doubt that, as I have emphasised throughout this work, the social contact field of people dwelling in rural communities is just that - a *field*, with no definable outer boundary; belonging is not felt by all people within the community, nor does any boundary contain the residence of everyone who *does* belong. I have emphasised the overlapping, interconnected and hierarchical nature of both social, business, and identity geographies. Yet equally, I have also demonstrated how easily, clearly and decisively people can identify with their primary focus of community, and the spatially consistent patterns these investigations produce. Some boundary is essential for analysis of any territorial based social group – how could you draw a reliable sample without one (or in a qualitative study, know where to stop)? Indeed, Australia's official statistical geography (the ASGC) imposes a *de facto* spatial definition on community studies that require support from official statistics. It is similarly hard to conceive of any accountable, monitorable regional policy being administered from Canberra without regional boundaries. And to use available statistics too, a practical delimitation is needed to avoid gaps, overlaps and double counting. In the present case I have (as described in Chapter 9) met these problems of oversimplification of a complex reality by defining territorial social areas at four alternative levels, for use in research settings at the appropriate scale.

In sum, I do not pretend that the mapping of social patterns is an exact science. But I do contend that it is an important, meaningful part of social life for a substantial majority of rural residents, and that for them it is the focus of a strong shared identity. Is this naïve empiricism, or to speak the unspeakable, 'spatial fetishism'? I do not believe so, but I do suspect that the fear of being so branded has made many authors surreptitiously downplay the delimitation problem, avoid it altogether, or casually adopt some ready-made boundary without investigating its correspondence with actual social interactions.

Promoting privilege and inequity?

As noted in earlier chapters, it is only recently that the concept of place-linked community has 'come in from the cold' in social science research, and many writers have pointed to its negative features and warned against treating it as a rural idyll. Yet I have insisted that local communities must continue to be the basis of a sustainable rural system, and be allocated an ongoing role in the governance structure. The frequent criticisms of community as a worthy object of study on the grounds that communities have been shown to be fractured and heterogeneous (Young, 1990), facilitators of social exclusion (Alston, 2005) or fraught with social problems (Bourke 2001) are totally beside the point – when have small local communities ever been anything else? They are none the less a highly important reality as arenas of social interaction, foci for a sense of belonging, and generators of social capital, and their geography is important. Far from idealising communities in this work, I have demonstrated that they are heterogenous, made up of status groups and factions, and vary greatly in openness, integration and inclusivity; and that some residents within the community will feel no sense of belonging. In my field experience, though, the

majority do feel a strong sense of place and of belonging. I find it incongruous that the presence of a mystic special link to "country" is readily accepted to exist among people of (sometimes tenuous) Aboriginal descent, while any similar sense in non-Aboriginal Australians seems to go unrecognised.

Localism and the future: "the end of place"?

Again I expect criticism for pursuing a fast vanishing Will-o'-the wisp. I have stressed the need for localism, the importance of sense of place and of belonging, strong inertia of territorial based groupings, and the presence of large reserves of social capital, all focussed dominantly at the local community level. Yet it is important to note that I have also found that the uptake of electronic communications, and the impact they are likely to have, is still only in its very early stages. What are the chances that the findings of this thesis will be quickly reduced to past history, perhaps even rendered irrelevant, by the Internet, satellite communications, cultural globalisation and inventions yet to come, within the next couple of decades? There seem to be three varieties of answer.

The first is well illustrated by Markku Tykkyläinen, a Finnish geographer who has worked on fly-in/fly-out solutions to remote mineral resource development. His view tends toward the complete replacement of localism by post-modern placelessness.

> In order to understand the current course of development, it is necessary to focus on what 'local' really means in this emerging 'network society', and the feasibility of various new types of evolving communities in relation to the development of resource sites. New social formations may be likened to cyber-communities. Although the development of a cyber-community into a fundamental, socially meaningful concept has little relevance to today's rural villages in Poland and Hungary, the direction of development is clear: towards networking, multi-locale structures, work in cyber-space, as hoc organisations, post-modern lifestyles, and new spatial identities. (Tykkyläinen 1998, 355)

A further viewpoint is that within this cyber network society, a new form of localism independent of physical space will develop through a thickening of the mesh of cyber-contacts producing 'virtual places' around foci of common interest, expressed by Adams (1998):

> if some aspects of computer networking, like other modern techniques, threaten to immerse us in an anonymity, powerlessness, and an immoral, anaesthetised space, disembedding us from the place-based communities that once gave us a moral grounding, other aspects of computer networking evoke the possibility of something different: a social world that is global in scope and local in character. (Adams 1998, 104)

Such a world is highly unlikely to satisfy either the need for the local, sense of place, or the need for human contact. Much more likely, I suggest, is the view of Graham (1998) where he writes:

> But while cities are often spreading out to be vast, multicentred urban regions linked into global networks, place-based relational webs that rely on adjacency, propinquity and physical flows remain central to the experience of human social, economic and

> cultural life. The two rely on each other; they recursively interact. (Graham 1998, 185)

Likewise in a recent review Walmsley (2006, 10) concludes that cyberspace may not necessarily be the transformative force often assumed for it, and points to the transitory, and superficial aspects which render it little able to replace (rather than supplement) existing forms of community. Together these comments reinforce my view that for rural people, the present extra-local contact and communication field is certain to become very much stronger and more dominated by electronic media, but at the same time the underlying web of local contacts is highly unlikely to be replaced by any form of 'virtual place'. I do not believe that the conclusions reached in Chapter 9 are negated by the electronic communications revolution. The urgent need is to redefine, not abolish, the local and to build on what we have.

Some limitations of the study

I would strongly defend my approach on the matters discussed thus far in this chapter, but I am aware too of some limitations which must also be catalogued.

Firstly, I have emphasised the importance and correctness of the "triple bottom line" approach to planning for sustainability in rural Australia, with the important addition of a fourth element (governance) to the accepted trinity. However, I believe that the social element of the triple bottom line is the one requiring most research, even to understand it sufficiently to set appropriate goals. Hence I have concentrated almost entirely on this element, with little attention to the economic, and practically none at all to the equally important environmental, element. The future impact of biotechnology on farming likewise receives no attention. I would contend, though, that none of what I have written is incompatible with a concerted effort to improve environmental and biological sustainability, in conjunction with the social and economic aspects.

Secondly, most of the research on which this thesis is based is pitched at the community level. Because this is what currently means most to the majority of rural people my main concern has been to argue for a sustainability goal which will allow the mosaic of small communities its best chance for survival. Places at the neighbourhood level may be quite significant to their residents, but in the intermediate and outer settlement zones, I have considered them too small and weak to incorporate into planning schemes, and in those zones I have conducted very little specific research on them. Likewise, apart from my work on the logical bounding of regions, I have personally done very little research on regional economic performance or economic strategies. I have concentrated on the relations between the community and the region, not on the broad variants of regional policy for survival of the whole unit. Fortunately, though, South Australia is very well served by its economists and economic geographers well equipped to deal with these matters.

Thirdly, even for someone who has spent most of his research career in one State, South Australia is large, and my field experience does not cover all of it. Thus in my field work I have on the whole dealt more with broad-acre, non-irrigated farming where subsumption has been very limited, than with the intensive types of farming, especially viticulture where it has been extensive. Regionally, I have done field work

in most of the State, except for the Lower South-east. However, for most of the detailed evidence I have presented I have relied on particular studies that have been replicated to provide time series. The contrast between these lacunae and other areas of detailed knowledge may, albeit unwittingly, have coloured the construction of my argument, and have certainly affected my selection of evidence.

Disciplines, discourses and frustrations

I would like to think that the arguments presented here are potentially of substantial significance to the future of our rural areas; this is another motive in producing this consolidated account. As a geographer working in matters of relevance to rural planning, I have frequently experienced frustration in getting research results into arenas where they may receive serious consideration in policy development. The most success I have personally had in this regard has been at local and to a lesser extent State government level, when undertaking field studies on request. Academics are under constant pressure to perform through publication, usually in journals respected for high standards of scholarship within their own or related disciplines – most of which are not read or consulted by the key politicians, public servants and practitioners who would be in a position to implement or at least consider the findings. Politicians in search of briefings, and planners in search of ideas, dip selectively into the disciplinary 'silos'. Quite often, too, our writings are scattered through a variety of different journals and book chapters, and fail to make a collective impact. Because of the traditional pecking order among the social sciences, geographers have to work very hard, preferably in areas where hard data can be produced fairly quickly, to get the ear of politicians and senior public servants. Some have done so with conspicuous success, but the path is not easy. The project of converting our findings into action has thus had a triple handicap: low disciplinary status, writing mainly for a small audience of fellow-travellers, and splitting our effort between a large variety of publication venues.

In recent times, most Australian geography departments have been merged with various others, discipline boundaries have been loosened up, and inter-disciplinary discourses have arisen which reach a wider audience. The discourses, though, seem to have become the new 'silos', again competing unequally for the influential ear that can potentially put research results into practice. Nevertheless these more general discourses give geographers a greater chance to see practical results from sound scholarship. Some, but not enough, geographers are seizing the opportunity.

To round off my balance sheet, my dissatisfaction with the piecemeal practical results achieved in my own career is another reason for producing a consolidated work. The bottom line for social scientists (for me, at least) is to have a satisfactory answer in conscience to the "So what?" question. Have we made a useful contribution to human welfare? And if so, *whose* welfare? Students often ask this question in a classroom setting, but even more salutary is the same question asked by a farmer who has just interrupted shearing for an hour to help with a field study, asking what is the point of it, and more importantly what will be *done* with the findings. The answer depends only partly on the quality of our work, and probably much more on where and how well we urge its adoption.

Implications and issues arising from the study

Replication and time series

One implication that I hope emerges from this work is the value of replication, not only for the checking of earlier results but also for the provision of time series to study process. I believe, for example, that this thesis demonstrates the great value of a periodic broad synoptic approach that (unlike the Census) allows quantitative ('hard factual') data to be precisely linked at the individual level with qualitative ('soft') data – the latter being essential for deeper understanding and interpretation of the former. Without some such stratagem, it is too easy for decision makers to dismiss the vital qualitative evidence as 'anecdotal' – a certain kiss of death. I believe it is important that my 1992/93 study or something very like it, be repeated as soon as possible and extended to other states, particularly Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia.

Myths, testing and verification

Replications and longitudinal studies, however, are relatively uncommon in Australian geography, partly because our prevailing academic culture privileges innovation over the consolidation of existing knowledge. Young researchers are expected to make their mark with something new and original, avoid becoming stereotyped within too narrow a field, move from one university to another quite frequently to extend their experience, build up a varied CV and so on. All these are perfectly logical and defensible. For later career researchers, similar considerations apply, in part influenced by Australian Research Council funding which (for good reasons) prioritises and rewards innovation, novelty and lateral thinking over careful checking and verification of existing results. Although understandable, the culture of innovation does risk allowing some results of questionable validity to enter the conventional wisdom without adequate challenge.

Three cases in point brought out in this study are

1. the notion of "sponge cities[2]"
2. the notion that a country town's population size alone is a suitable measure of its viability
3. the notion of "uncoupling" of country towns' development from the farm population in their hinterlands

The first of these in particular in my view urgently needs further contemporary research. The questions of how far to promote growth in regional capitals, and how far 'trickle up' flows balance or exceed 'trickle-down' are vital ones for policy designed to achieve sustainable regional economies, and were not directly tackled by Beer, Bolam and Maude (1994) in their definitive study of non-capital cities.

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[2] In South Australia the nearest thing to a 'sponge city' is not Mount Gambier or Whyalla, but Roxby Downs – the new company town that sprang up based on the Olympic Dam uranium and copper mining development. By recruiting its workforce just as the worst effects of the rural crisis were hitting Eyre Peninsula, Western Mining drew off a large number of younger workers from the region's farms, especially on the northern fringe, where Roxby Downs became known as "Kimba North".

As to the second, the point was discussed at some length in Chapter 9. Additionally, in a 'capitals' framework (natural, human, social, produced, and institutional capitals at the disposal of a community), to judge a community's viability by just one crude measure of its human capital (total population) is to ignore all the rest of its capital endowment, as well as the *qualities* of the population (quoted in Cocklin and Alston 2003, 205).

On the third question raised above, to the extent that this 'uncoupling' represents real diversification of community economies, it is a most welcome development; but note the major regional differences on Fig. 9.14. A proper study requires integrated data for the whole community, separable into urban, dispersed rural, and small cluster components, as in the database for the present study. Without this, the increasing spread of both farm and non-farm workforce across all three residential components may vitiate the presumed causal links between hinterland trends and urban response.

Should researchers accept structures as given?

In trying to be heard in relation to policy development, academics face the strategic question of how far to accept the existing order of things as immutable givens. This applies to structures (e.g. governance institutions), hegemonic discourses (e.g. the dominance of economics in political influence) and processes (e.g. globalisation). To overturn any of these things would involve a huge struggle. In the present case the matter of regional governance is the crucial concern. I have pointed to the vital need for constitutionally guaranteed, democratically elected and accountable local government authorities whose borders coincide with regions large enough to be economically viable, but based on endogenous local cohesion. This should not present an insuperable problem.

The real difficulty, however, comes in securing a guaranteed but subordinate role within the structure for the constituent communities within the region as something more than Wards but less than the present LGA status, on the model of British parish councils. It must be acknowledged that this is very close to recommending a fourth tier of government in a country which (especially from an economic rationalist point of view) is already claimed to be over-governed. Yet I believe it is essential to achieve real progress in planning for regional sustainability. In A.J. Brown's recent review of this problem his most significant conclusion is

> … the need for a more considered debate about the range of institutional options worth considering if genuine participation in regional development is to be sustained long-term, and local and regional agency seriously generated or unlocked (Brown 2005, 35).

Brown's paper points to a survey carried out in Queensland where people were asked which of four alternative governance structures they would favour in a hypothetical future: a) unchanged, b) as now with more new States, c) two-tier, abolishing States, and d) four-tier with both regional and local government. This is really no more than a straw poll, but as I know of no similar work, the results have a certain interest. Of the four alternatives c) was the most popular, and d) favoured only by a minority ranging from just 11% in Southern Queensland to 26% in Central Queensland. I

nevertheless believe that as well as fitting the observed organisation of space, the proposal I have made is also the most practicable and would involve the least disruption. In a cost-benefit analysis the benefits would be huge in terms of actually allowing regional development to get off the ground. The much-vaunted economies of scale and scope accruing to larger local government units would surely more than offset the devolution of purely local administration to the equivalent of parish councils, which again would help greatly in maintaining local social capital at the community level. The abolition of States is a pipe-dream that would involve huge cost and disruption. It is hard to see how Hurford's proposal for 51 regional assemblies with most of the current powers of States could cost less than the six states and two territory governments, nor how such small units could avoid problems of nepotism, influence and the like. Moreover, the States are the only sub-national units with established loyalties and traditions, and firmly fixed permanent boundaries. To abolish them and try to build up bridging social capital to support new cross-State political divisions would, I suggest, destroy far more social capital than it created. When comparing with other OECD countries the proposal I have presented is far from unique or outrageously complex. Thus in the UK there are parish councils, District Councils above them, the Counties above them, then in Wales and Scotland devolved sub-national parliaments, while the UK as a whole is also represented in the European Parliament. It must be remembered that Australia is a *continent* as well as a nation.

A question of ethics

If one is researching anything really important, questions of ethics are bound to arise. One of the major concerns in the present work is the extent to which the researcher identifies with, and seeks to represent the interests of, the subjects of research in the presentation of findings. The ethical question for me is to achieve the right balance between reporting objective truth (in so far as one can discern it) 'without fear or favour' on the one hand, and deliberate interventionist 'action research' on the other. By the latter I mean presentation of one's results in a way calculated to remove perceived injustice, give a voice to the marginalised, or achieve a more equitable outcome for one's subjects. My own position is clearly one of empathy and sympathy for rural people, based on my own origins and on many years of frequent contact with them. In this study I have nevertheless sought, consistent with earlier comments in this chapter, to take a middle position of frankness about the severe prospects facing small town communities, yet proposing a system that holds out hope for those determined to survive[3]. There is great danger that prophecies of wholesale decline will become self-fulfilling parts of the accepted wisdom.

To illustrate this serious ethical problem I will close with an example. Should this work ever become widely read, I would wish it to provide a counterbalance to suggestions such as those of Sorensen that some small places be selected for

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[3]I learned early in my career about the responsibility borne by academic researchers when asked by a Church-based group of local leaders in 1970 to undertake a survey of their district. The object was to determine impartially which of a group of small towns should be chosen as the site for new common facilities. In my report, I adopted the 'objective facts' approach, and was quickly confronted by people not involved in requesting the survey, with businesses or employment in the non-selected towns. In my naivety, I had concentrated on the positive, and not appreciated the potential negative, consequences of my work.

"euthanasia", and even more for those of Forth (2000, 2001)[4] and Forth and Howell (2002). The latter suggest a triage procedure for small towns, confrontation of the residents of places deemed unviable with the worst-case scenario, and subsidised relocation for those who want to leave (what about the impact on those who don't?). Forth's views, initially expressed in a public forum prompted much sensationalised comment in the popular press. An oral presentation can easily be misquoted and sensationalised in the press, and a published clarification later unfortunately does not undo the damage to the legitimate hopes and life chances of many thousands of real people. Despite the subsequent publication of a reply by the researcher in the press, followed a more measured debate in the journal Regional Policy and Practice (2000, 9 (2)) the danger is that such views may give strength to the arm of the economic rationalists in both main political parties as well as influential public servants. To me the title of Forth and Howell's paper published two years later ("Don't cry for me, Upper Wombat") itself is derisive and dismissive of small Australian communities. The paper's relentless economic determinism leaves little or no role for human agency in a future controlled by structures. In the name of 'honesty' the authors claim that even self-fulfilling prophecies of decline can be justified, in preference to the raising of hopes by 'false wizards' and 'small-town revivalists'.

The raising of false hope is certainly a serious ethical trap, but so too is the creation of a climate of blanket pessimism and despair. I suggest that ethical behaviour requires a better balance between a) avoiding false optimism and b) promoting despair; it also, I suggest, requires us to avoid unwarranted and unheralded damage to the vital interests of those who provide us with information, unless informed consent is given beforehand.

Coda

In writing this work in retirement, I am in the fortunate position of being immune from the 'publish or perish' syndrome, can regard political correctness as unnecessary, and treat academic ostracism by those who dislike my approach with indifference! Nevertheless, I hope it will be of some value in helping to formulate a viable future for those for whom it was primarily intended - namely the rural people of South Australia. For me, it ties up loose ends. My resolve to do so was clinched by a chance encounter on a country walk about eighteen months ago. To explain, one of my favourites among the many poems I was forced to learn at school (for which compulsion I have ever after been grateful) is Thomas Gray's 'Elegy written in a country churchyard'. In a small hamlet called Cherry Gardens in the Adelaide Hills, there is such a secluded small churchyard, hedged about with cypress, gum and bottlebrush trees and somewhat overgrown around the edges with grass and wildflowers. In one corner, beneath a leaning gravestone of Willunga slate lie the mortal remains of one Ann Field, aged 50, "Who departed this life on Nov[er] 10th 1859".

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[4]Forth was quoted in the Adelaide Advertiser 5/7/2000,14) as suggesting that "Country towns with populations below 4000 should be allowed to slowly die". In the same report the then Regional Development Minister Rob Kerin commented "what some academics might put forward just ignores the reality they're actually people and not just numbers".

The inscription in the hard slate stands out as sharply as if it were carved just yesterday:

> STAY TRAVELLER STAY AND CAST AN EYE
> FOR AS YOU ARE SO ONCE WAS I
> BUT AS I AM SO MUST YOU BE
> SO PREPARE YOURSELF TO FOLLOW ME.

Looking forward, looking back, preparation. Completing this work is perhaps one form of preparation – and in the meantime may even open the way to contribute a little more.