Report on The Undergraduate Awards Global Summit

DANIEL MCKAY

Daniel McKay was awarded a prize for his essay 'Dust and Bluster: An Historical Evaluation of the Political Discourse on Drought in Australia' at The Undergraduate Awards in 2014. His essay has been published in The Undergraduate Journal and the Burgmann Journal.

The unexpected is what makes history so exhilarating. The thrill is in the chase, as one hunts down forgotten, unknown or hidden stories in the dusty depths of libraries and archives. You never know what you'll find, or what twists and turns the story will take. However, when I began to research the story of political responses to the Australian experience of drought for a history course, it was wholly unexpected that my research would eventually lead to winning the Historical Studies category of The Undergraduate Awards and receiving a free trip to Dublin to accept a gold medal.

All good stories begin with an even bigger story. History is all about finding and telling such stories, of the people and places that have shaped the world around us. 'Research' is such a thunderously dull term for something so exciting. The remarkable Frank Bongiorno demonstrated this in his course on Australian political history, making the stories of our political institutions and politicians come alive. Encouraged to find our own topics for the research essay, I began researching political responses to the Australian experience of drought since European colonisation. This project had particular personal resonance, as I had grown up on a family farm in rural New South Wales during the long drought of the 2000s. As a member of the seventh generation of our family to live on the property, I knew that my experience fitted into a much longer history. My reflections turned to the wider Australian experience of an environmental variability that we take for granted in a 'land of droughts and flooding rains'. The story of how our political system has responded can only really be told by stepping back from individual droughts and looking at patterns over time.

Entering The Undergraduate Awards is a simple affair. So simple that, months down the track when I received a call from Ireland, I'd largely forgotten even entering. It seemed quite unreal, but after flying into Dublin the day after my last exam, the Irish welcome I received at the Global Summit was an utterly unforgettable experience. Each stage of the summit came in a magnificent historical setting: Dublin Town Hall, Iveagh House, Farmleigh House, Trinity College and Christchurch Cathedral. Locations that over the course of the summit

were peopled with brilliant delegates and guest speakers from around the world. Every room was full of a bright and bubbling optimistic chatter, as people discovered each other's research and plans for the future. The diverse range of guest speakers brought another dimension to the discussion – hearing from, amongst others, the filmmaker Lord Puttnam, entrepreneur Ingrid Vanderveldt, and former Harvard librarian Helen Shenton. Each had a fascinating story of how they had made careers out of curiosity and ideas.

On the last day of the Global Summit, we were each given the opportunity to present our research in the auditorium at the Google Headquarters. With limited time, and with an interest in sharing some of Australia's best art to an international audience, I used a selection of famous paintings from our national collections to convey the sense of changing understandings of environment and drought which they captured. From the bucolic arcadias of John Glover, to the more realistic treatments of the Australian landscape in the impressionism of Arthur Streeton, and finally the confronting imagery of Sidney Nolan, we can see an evolution not just in aesthetics, but a total cultural shift in our ways of seeing our environment.

The Global Summit ended on a high, with a black tie award ceremony in Christchurch Cathedral. Winners from each category were presented with a gold medal by Patricia O'Brien, the Irish Ambassador to the United Nations, as well as having their work published in *The Undergraduate Journal*. The evening finished with a magical dinner in the crypt of Christchurch Cathedral. The sight of everyone seated around a long white table that snaked its way through the undercroft, between the arches and great white marble eighteenth-century tombs, illuminated by unseen lights, will long be etched in my memory.

If I had deliberately set out to write a 'winning' essay, I would never have been so fortunate. Good research comes about by finding something that you are passionately curious or intrigued by. In the case of history, that's following an interesting story and working out what that tells us about ourselves. If you find something fascinating, chances are someone else will too. It is such a chance that is worth pursuing: entering The Undergraduate Awards is easy, the hard work of researching and writing for your essay is already done. By taking the time to fill out a form and upload a file, you have nothing to lose, and everything to gain. You may well just have an unexpected story of your own to tell.

Bibliography

McKay, Daniel (2013). Dust and Bluster: An historical evaluation of the political discourse on drought in Australia. *Burgmann Journal* (2) 33–39.

McKay, Daniel (2014). Dust and Bluster: An Historical Evaluation of the Political Discourse on Drought in Australia. *The Undergraduate Journal* 6 311–319.

This text is taken from *The ANU Undergraduate Research Journal*,
Volume Six, 2014, edited by Jonathon Zapasnik and Alexandra Hogan,
published 2015 by ANU eView, The Australian National University,
Canberra, Australia.