Eirene Mort (1899 – 1977) was an Arts and Crafts practitioner and teacher whose work reflected transitions in Australian art and culture, and in the opportunities available to women artists in changing patterns of taste, art markets and education. This thesis will examine the factors that shaped Mort’s career and contribution as an independent, and – for a time – prominent artist. I aim to assess the ways in which her struggles and achievements extend our understanding of the significance of gender in the art world of twentieth century Australia. Analysing Mort’s wide-ranging body of art, together with her memoirs, family histories, financial documents, teaching records, social networks and contemporary reports of her life and work, I will draw out these patterns as evident in her life and work. Mort’s significance as an historical figure is twofold. Firstly, the course of her career illustrates the interdependency of art with a range of social and political influences, including gendered identities, patronage, class-based networks, education and aesthetic movements. Secondly, the relative neglect of Mort’s work highlights the need to restore these dimensions to studies of artists in their context, and to dissolve an often artificial distinction between ‘art’ and a range of craft-based practices in their social contexts. My biographical approach will be informed by methodologies using qualitative and quantitative data to reconstruct the social and personal contexts of her art practice, and to relate her work to changes in taste, patronage and education. My sources are often fragmentary, including papers, art works, photographs, reviews and memorabilia, but the circumstances surrounding their existence help to place Mort in the wider artistic, social, and economic patterns of her times, reflecting the way in which one woman’s life intersected with contemporary societal trends.

Stephanie Woodbridge

Women and Great War Repatriation in Australia

The end of the Great War saw hundreds of thousands of servicemen repatriated to Australia. It was to be a “land fit for heroes”. The challenges and failures of the repatriation system are central to current studies of the Great War, and to our understanding of the legacy of that conflict. But what of the thousands of women who cared for, and loved, those who returned injured, sick and mentally scared? This project will examine the role women played in the repatriation of servicemen and further explore the repercussions of war on women in Australia. I will use a sample of some of the thousands of repatriation files held by the National Archives of Australia, focusing upon pension appeals records to analyse how the return of men from the front impacted upon their wives, mothers, daughters and sisters. I intend to take a sample of approximately five percent of three consignment lists, focusing mainly upon Victorian and New South Wales files. I will examine how through correspondence with not only the Repatriation
Board and governmental bodies, but also charities, local Members of Parliament and even Prime Ministers, women became advocates and mediators for their husbands, sons and indeed, themselves. I will use repatriation archives in conjunction with contemporary newspaper and magazine sources, as well as crime rates, marriage and divorce statistics from Victoria and New South Wales; along with an examination of returned nurses' experiences and participation of women in private and public groups. I hope to establish a broader view of how women negotiated the space between the private and public spheres. By exploring the repatriation process through the eyes of women as active participants, with an emphasis on including women in Australia's Great War narrative, I hope to make a significant original contribution to the literature.

Elizabeth Hellwig

Sisters in Service: Dominican Lay Sisters and Institutional Change since 1867

From the 1700s, Dominican Sisters had two choices: to enter the Order as teacher or housekeeper. Compared to the life of the teaching ‘Choir Sister’, a housekeeping ‘Lay Sister’s’ role was simpler, with different rights and physically more strenuous, in practice equivalent to that of religious servant. In 1867 eight Sisters sailed from Ireland to establish a new Congregation that would provide education for children of the Irish diaspora in NSW. Two of the pioneers were Lay Sisters. With Vatican encouragement, the two-tiered system was suppressed in 1958. Despite new freedoms and accompanying responsibilities, both teachers and housekeepers kept to their distinctive, freely chosen occupations until the 1970s brought massive changes in convent lifestyle – a response to developments in church and wider social and cultural circles. Most writings about Religious women have concentrated on founders of social institutions. Even recent general, international, histories of Congregations have largely overlooked the place of Lay Sister. This thesis addresses that gap. A prosopographical approach will determine the common characteristics of this historical group of seventy-nine women, twenty percent of the total community. At the same time, a biographical dimension will add texture and depth through the richness of individual lives. Previously untapped archival material will be employed to attest to Lay Sisters’ individuality, their agency and contribution to an ever-developing Congregation. The women are traced chronologically, in a context that considers their position in Order, Church and Society over an almost 150 year period. Underpinning this story is institutional evolution, its cause and effect, not necessarily efficient, linear or optimizing. The study contributes to the wider history of women’s religious institutions, of domestic service among women’s groups and of Catholic education in Australia. It is perhaps unique in its presentation of a collective life of no longer voiceless women over such a time span.

Refreshment break: 11:00 to 11:30

Session 2: 11:30 to 12:30

Shauna Bostock-Smith

‘As Far Back As We Can Go’: An Aboriginal Family History from traditional Bundjalung Country to the Present Day

This thesis is a multi-generational study of my family history. I have traced the genealogies of my four Aboriginal grandparents’ family lines to as far back as we can go in the written historic record, just after White settlement of Bundjalung country on the top north-eastern part of New South Wales. My use of archival records, newspaper articles, maps of the movements of my ancestors, and an extensive collection of photographs vividly illustrate a rich narrative of the lives of my ancestors. These sources suggest a new direction in local histories at the colonial interface. The fundamental
question that I will address is: Can an Aboriginal family history illuminate something more than what has already been done in conventional scholarship on Aboriginal history - and if so, what? Rather than simply compiling and documenting history, my research seeks to explore family history in a deeply critical way for its radical potential to inform historiography. I identify two main phases in Australian historiography; one was a predominantly White perspective of Australian history leading up to the breaking of ‘the great Australian silence’ in the late 1960s; and the next was what I call the ‘revelation’ phase of Australian history in the 70s, 80s and 90s, which helped to elucidate the Aboriginal perspective. Much of it emphasized negative, even malevolent aspects of administrative, structural and regional racism. My findings question this black or white dichotomy because I have found many examples of Aboriginal/White solidarity. Based on my work so far, I hypothesise that this kind of investigation of Aboriginal family history, coupled with evidence of positive experiences between Aboriginal and White people, will contribute to a new, refreshed perspective of Australian history. I present a perspective that, while not undermining the suffering and dispossession, includes positive stories of resilience, strength and compassion.

Annemarie McLaren

The Blue Mountains: a History of Place

The Blue Mountains, 60 kilometres west of Sydney, were legendarily crossed by three gentlemen explorers in 1813. The story goes that the colony was hemmed in by these mountains, an enormous barrier of sandstone and impenetrable shrub, and the crossing allowed Sydney to overspill into the fertile plains on the other side and march West to opportunity and progress. This project complicates and decentres this story, presenting an interwoven history of different peoples and environments in the Blue Mountains. It is a story of the perceptions, uses and actions of convicts, emancipists, administrators, free-settlers, pastoralists, naturalists, officers-turned-landed-gentry, different Indigenous peoples, as well as the quiet co-determinants: vegetation, topography and water. This project explores how a range of cultural perspectives and experiences formed, developed and interacted with one another in a turbulent time of settlement and dispossession and how lives and communities formed and reformed in this region by desire or necessity. The approach has plurality at its core because the Blue Mountains were travelled over, explored, hidden in and home to a cross-section of the cultures in the colony. With an ethnographic eye to movement, an ecological eye to land-management, and an appreciation of the vast and evolving range of cultures and experiences in the beginning decades of the colony, a richer history emerges from colonial accounts, reminiscences, newspapers, court and church records, paintings, family histories, and an understanding of the environment as archive. By drawing on the literatures of expedition, cross-cultural contact, literary studies, narrative, material culture, place and environmental history, this project aims to be textured cultural history of lives and experiences in unstable colonial decades. I hope for this project to contribute to fresh understandings of the spread of European settlement and the development of experiences in the cultural and environmental specificities of a penal settler-colonial society.

Lunch: 12:30 to 1:30
This project will analyse the significance of the ideas of ‘free’ and ‘productive’ work in shaping political understanding in colonial New South Wales. Historians have tended to focus on the transition from penal despotism to self-government when accounting for Australia’s political origins. This focus on institutional change, however, has obscured the broader assumptions that shaped political understanding in the period. A vast international historiography has emphasised the causal relation between emerging conceptions of free and productive work and the transformation of politics into a liberal, commercial form in the eighteenth-century Anglophone world. This project asks how re-situating colonial NSW in the context of these transformations might provide new perspectives on the ideas that underpinned understandings of politics in the colony. It explores the extent that these ideas about work shaped liberal understandings of politics from early settlement and delimited emerging political identities and practises. These practices and identities included individual-autonomy, self-ownership and the male producer-citizen, declining civic-virtue and instrumental understandings of government. The idea of free and productive work will be traced from its origins in eighteenth-century Britain, to its influence on imperial and penal policies and transplantation to NSW. My project explores the significance of these ideas in forming authorities’, reformers’ and settlers’ assumptions about the nature of Aboriginal, convict and settler labour and maps how these assumptions shaped political understanding in contexts of everyday governance. These contexts include: the experience of convict workers; assisted migration; the courtroom where employment laws were being re-interpreted; the intervention of public administration; and the workplace. Utilising methodologies of textual analysis and the identification of paradigms, the research analyses official documentation, treatises, public ephemera and personal reflections to re-evaluate the form of politics developing in colonial NSW and contribute to broader interpretations about the advent and character of liberal politics in nineteenth-century settler-societies.

Thomas Lalevée
Vitalism, Politics and the Science of Society in France, 1795-1848

In the wake of the Terror, and the wider problems generated by the Revolution, many thinkers in France sought to develop new and alternative approaches to politics that would place a reconstructed society on a more secure ‘scientific’ base. From Pierre Cabanis (1757-1808) to Saint-Simonian Ange Guépin (1805-1873), these theorists borrowed, adapted and challenged the prominent physiological doctrines of the age and reworked them towards practical ends. This led to an intensifying focus on the capacities and attributes of the human body that was heavily entangled with debates about the character of both the social and the natural order. This thesis will illuminate this process by studying the role played by a popular and influential tradition of medical, and metaphysical, thought known as ‘vitalism’. It will investigate how vitalism shaped and informed French social theory in the first half of the nineteenth century in ways that scholars have yet to recognise. Though vitalism was first and foremost a doctrine about the character and function of organic life, it supplied a dynamic view of nature which played a crucial role in early nineteenth-century understandings of society, culture and history. Drawing on a range of sources (published texts, pamphlets, journal articles, private correspondence, unpublished manuscripts), my study will seek to provide an account of early French social science that situates ideas within their intellectual and historical context. To achieve this, I will interpret the works of canonical authors alongside the writings of their now obscure contemporaries. I will also read these with
the aim of probing and further investigating the claim made by Strauss that ‘modern’ European thought is defined by the aspiration to develop a naturalistic account of human morality. In this way, my thesis will endeavour to be both historically and philosophically rigorous.

Alexandra Roginski

A Touch of Power: Encounters in Australian Popular Phrenology

The science of mind known as phrenology, and the resulting popular practice of ‘reading’ heads, rippled through Europe and the colonial world from the early nineteenth century. My project asks how phrenologists in Australia found and exerted power through this physical system for judging character and intellect. I focus on the physical encounters that phrenology created – lecturers reading heads on stage, phrenologists exhuming and trading human skulls for study, itinerant phrenologists visiting Aboriginal missions, or character-readers plying their trade in seamy inner-city arcades. My timeframe spans from the mid-nineteenth century until the mid-to-late twentieth century, with at least one notable late phrenologist still practising in Sydney in the 1970s. Historians of phrenology until now have primarily studied its influence during the nineteenth-century in the UK or US. Only one longer work – an unpublished doctoral thesis from 1994 – attempts to capture phrenology’s greater story in Australia, but it too concerns the nineteenth century, and takes an intellectual history slant. In reconstructing the physical encounters of phrenology, I will draw on newspapers, books, pamphlets, court records, maps, material culture, mission records, fiction, cartoons and poetry. My analysis integrates social, cultural and intellectual history, and will be rooted in specific sites (such as Melbourne’s Eastern Market). I am also building a database of practical phrenologists in Australia using the ANU’s OCCAMS tool (for network and spatial analysis), and am developing biographies of particular phrenologists who embody broader themes. Oral evidence from twentieth-century clients will contribute to understanding the experiences of people who were phrenologised. As a contemporary angle to my analysis of an influential social practice, I will explore how Aboriginal artists, writers and communities today reflect on the legacy of skeletal acquisition by phrenologists, including through the event of an upcoming repatriation of a human cranium to coastal NSW.