Epilogue

I would like to see it flourish, not narrowly as a little branch of economics, but for what it is […] a big, eclectic agenda.

Deborah Oxley, February 2020

Pessimism is easy, interdisciplinarity is hard. Although it is difficult to do good economic history research in modern Australian universities, by acknowledging the work still to be done, I hope to be constructive. There are several important lessons from this history that can help policymakers and practitioners do better for Australian economic history moving forward, and for the myriad other interdisciplinary fields that change how we see the world. Economic historical work grew from the colonial project, and the need for governments to count, understand and govern the various aspects of the antipodes. In the interwar period, cooperation between governments, universities and the Workers’ Educational Association, and porous boundaries between disciplines, allowed broad economic history research to flourish. Post–World War II saw the expansion of universities, with Noel Butlin’s ambitious research agenda at The Australian National University (ANU) developing a close-knit community of scholars who understood Australia’s development through quantitative data and an inductive, economics-based approach. Parent disciplines were indulgent, as was the higher education sector, and, as a result, the subject bloomed primarily through separate departments established from the 1960s to the 1990s. While this was considered a ‘golden age’ by some, these departments encouraged inward-looking behaviour, and isolated some

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1 Oxley/Meredith interview. Unless otherwise specified, interviews cited are those conducted by the author: see Appendix for details.
scholars from parent disciplines. The Dawkins reforms from the late 1980s compounded these vulnerabilities, leading to the closure of departments, dispersal of students and attrition of scholars. However, this period also provided new opportunities, particularly with economics and business schools. Members were thus well-placed to capitalise on the field’s revival in recent years.

Negotiating the interdisciplinary space has required Australian economic historians to work within multiple intellectual, professional and institutional domains. Individual scholars have made choices regarding the frameworks, data, research questions and publication outlets they adopt from parent disciplines, and scholarship exists along a spectrum from historians interested in economic matters, to economists with long-run data. The pendulum has shifted several times over the past century, from Sir Timothy Coghlan and Noel Butlin’s social science–based national income accounting, to the integrated social, political and economic research of interwar scholars and the Melbourne group, to the dominance of cliometrics, and the recent broad, but somewhat fragmented body of work. As others have reflected, it is difficult to determine a unifying or uniquely ‘Australian’ approach. A key feature of the field’s story is the ongoing debate about the ‘best’ or ‘most appropriate’ method for understanding Australia’s economic past, with many acknowledging the field’s diversity as a key contribution.²

Negotiating space has also required economic historians to convince parent disciplines of the validity of their approach. Disciplines can protect interdisciplinary fields by providing funding, a student base and validation of new research. Interdisciplinary fields thus depend on the indulgence of disciplines through key research questions or the skills that are seen as appropriate for professional instruction. This has worked in economic history’s favour, with support from both disciplines in the post–World War II decades corresponding with professional space, high student numbers, command over resources and the ability to maintain a dedicated workforce. On the other hand, the retraction of support from both the history and economics disciplines in the 1990s was a very hard lesson in the risks associated with conducting interdisciplinary research and instruction. Economic history’s progress has thus been characterised by the uncertainty of having to integrate with, yet work independently

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² Oxley/Meredith interview. See also Lloyd; Ville; Hatton; Alford interviews.
from, multiple knowledge domains. This can make it hard to define appropriate research questions and methodologies, or even know the best way to ensure one’s future career prospects. Economic historians have grappled with these questions, identifying the excitement associated with producing new knowledge, as well as the vulnerability they feel from dependence on the prosperity of larger groups.

These risks can be mitigated or exacerbated by the higher education environment, with the progress of Australian economic history demonstrating the interaction between research *place* and research *outcome*. Institutions like universities have been key organising structures for research, and university settings – the physical space, funding structure, students, and hierarchical aspirations – have influenced the research that scholars do. The cross-disciplinary support afforded to Butlin’s efforts at ANU in the 1950s, for example, or the Australian Research Council’s funding of large economic history projects more recently, have been invaluable for the field’s visibility, recognition and bargaining power. On the other hand, neoliberal universities and performance incentives based on disciplinary measures of success have been detrimental to the field’s vibrancy, with the attrition of scholars, and substantial decline of the student base.

Departments of economic history presented a different form of existential threat. For a relatively brief period (the 1960s through to the 1990s), many Australian economic historians worked in small departments. This form of organisation was determined externally, through university expansion and the underlying logic of small departmental groups led by a ‘God Professor’. While departments did stabilise some professional uncertainties such as the number of students, they discouraged interdisciplinary integration. The isolation and strong ties developed within small departments have been, at times, inappropriate for the broad networks needed to work in the interdisciplinary space. This book demonstrates that departments are not necessary for the field’s progress, with some of the most celebrated contributions produced in the absence of economic history departments. On the other hand, less constrained communicating infrastructures such as collaborations, dedicated outreach efforts, and the activities of the *Australian Economic History Review* and the Economic History Society of Australia and New Zealand have made much greater inroads with regards to interdisciplinary integration.
The progress of Australian economic history demonstrates the unique features of interdisciplinary fields. While disciplines are designed to operate through consensus, shared paradigms and agreement on best practice, interdisciplinary research is valuable for integrating and communicating knowledge between disciplines. For university policymakers and administrators, this case emphasises the disconnect between rhetoric promoting interdisciplinary knowledge, and university structures and incentives that reinforce disciplines. For practitioners, this book highlights not only the field’s diverse intellectual possibilities, but also advocates for the creation of broad, vibrant cross-disciplinary spaces as the key to ensuring the field’s continued value and relevance.