CELEBRATING THE PAST:
The Growth of Amateur History in South Australia

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ABSTRACT

South Australians have formed numerous organisations to celebrate and preserve the past. However, compared with residents of the other states of Australia and of the United States, the other settler-society in the new world, they were late to form societies to commemorate their history.

This thesis attempts to explain the reasons for the tardy development of historical organisations and in South Australia through a comparison of developments with the United States and the rest of Australia. Chapters one to six trace the growth of amateur history in the United States, in the other Australian colonies/states, and in South Australia over three periods - from settlement of each region until 1920; from 1921 until 1945; and from 1946 until 1974, the year the Historical Society of South Australia was founded. While the main focus of the study is South Australia, for each time period the thesis looks first at developments in the United States and then at the movement in the other Australian states, highlighting similarities and differences in the commemoration of history in both regions. It then details the growth of historical awareness in South Australia. The study outlines where South Australians followed the models already in place in the other two regions, and where they acted independently.

Chapters seven and eight analyse the current state of historical organisations in the three regions, and explore possible reasons for the staggering growth of amateur history in the last 30 years. Chapter Seven examines responses to a questionnaire sent to officials of historical organisations in the United States, the other Australian states, and South Australia. The data elucidate the similarities and differences in the development of amateur history between the three regions. In addition, they challenge the often unsubstantiated claims proposed by commentators to explain the phenomenal growth in historical awareness among the general public. Chapter Eight focuses on South Australia and reviews data obtained from a questionnaire sent to individual members of historical organisations. The collected information provides a profile of membership of historical groups in South Australia and again questions the reasons for the rise in amateur history.