

## **A HISTORY OF A DIOCESE – WHEN ‘LIFE STORY’ BECOMES ‘LIFE HISTORY’**

### **An oral history approach to a history of the Diocese of Rockhampton 1882-2022.**

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On 29 October this year, Margaret Somerville, professor of bioethics at the National School of Medicine of the University of Notre Dame, Australia stated:

To form a society, we must create the glue that binds us together. We used to do that through a shared religion: the word *religion*, comes from the Latin *Ligere*, to bind together and *re*, to rebind together. This glue or shared religion consists of the values, attitudes, beliefs, stories and so on from which we create an overarching story that we tell each other and all buy into.

She concluded,

In a multicultural, secular society, such as Australia, religion can no longer fulfil that essential function of binding us together. “Secular religions” have emerged to take over this role of traditional religion.<sup>1</sup>



The Map of Queensland, Australia, showing the Diocese of Rockhampton. The Rockhampton Diocese in Central Queensland covers 415,000 square kilometres. In comparison Ireland is 84,421 square kilometres

Map of Queensland and divisions of the Catholic Dioceses. Until 1930 the Rockhampton Catholic diocese extended north of the Tropic of Capricorn to Cape York

### *Diocese of Rockhampton*

140 years of diocesan history is in part a history of an age when religion was the glue that bound Australian society together and it is a history of the current reality when we are not able to make that generalisation any longer.

I have approached the task of establishing a continuous and cohesive record of 140 years of diocesan history under the main threads and themes of origin, engagement, leadership and culture. These elements are viewed firstly through the lens of ‘public memory’ located in archives, library shelves, newspapers and academic discourse. Secondly, there is ‘personal memory’ or oral history of the personal recollections of religious belief and practices, of people of all ages and cultural backgrounds, as a multiplicity of experiences, perspectives, interpretations and subjectivities.

Oral history is the collection of stories and reminiscences of a person or persons who have firsthand knowledge of any number of experiences. The collection of life stories that I gathered represents the starting point of this work and is in keeping with qualitative research methodology where there are multiple approaches as well as multiple types of oral history.<sup>2</sup> There is in fact an extensive pedagogy behind oral history and the act of gathering personal recollections.

The basic technique of oral history is also in keeping with the qualitative research methodology where the goals for both the oral historian and the qualitative researcher are similar. Both seek to fashion a narrative to represent the lived experience and interpretation, and both are involved in describing and explaining someone's memory of events and activities. Both use interviews, observations, documents, photographs, videos and drawings as evidence.<sup>3</sup>

Oral history extends the boundaries of a traditional history. By gathering oral data, I am able to examine the deeper and more subtle questions about the Diocese of Rockhampton; i.e. the inner realities of Catholic faith commitment and practice. This approach has necessitated some innovative qualitative methodology such as the task of tabulating individual responses that apply to the themes of certain chapters.

### ***Oral history theory and popular memory***

Oral historian, Paul Thompson argues that one of the great contributions made by oral history has been its role in

democratising history through admitting the voices of those traditionally excluded from the ‘mainstream’.<sup>4</sup> In this history, the voices of men and women about their experiences as members of the Catholic Church are central to the narrative. This history seeks to understand, through oral history, both the history of this particular diocese and the broader historical and social contexts in which the Catholics of the diocese lived. Biographical approaches in general, and life history methods in particular, are eminently suitable for recording many aspects of a particular religion relating to church law for example, and of a lifetime of personal faith experience and commitment.<sup>5</sup>

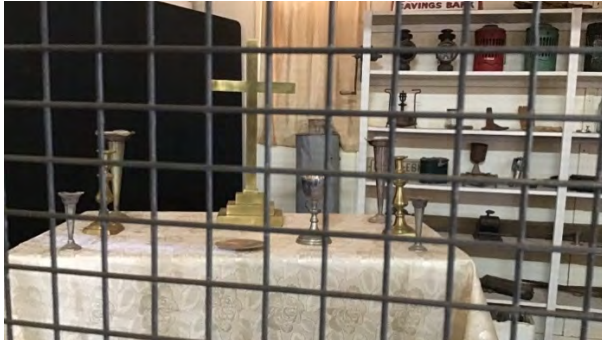
This history of the Diocese of Rockhampton moves away from a focus on ‘structure, macro-politics and economics and the lives of the elite’ by incorporating the lived experiences of people who called themselves ‘Catholic’. It becomes an analysis of ‘Catholic faith as something experienced as well as planned’.<sup>6</sup> Through oral history there is the added layer of a Church history and the possibility of the record of that deeper sometimes indescribable experience of the sacred.

Australian Church historian Patrick O’Farrell argues that real history is often ‘hidden away in the minds and hearts of ordinary men and women’. Australian historian Roy Williams adds that this is true of much religious history where little survives of the thoughts and beliefs of the people to whom all clerical activity is directed.

The process for me as the interviewer is to move from life story to life history which involves a range of ethical

issues.<sup>7</sup> For example, as I have progressively inserted personal stories into the narrative, I have cross-checked with the interviewees that what I have quoted is accurate. The interviews I have conducted have included women and men of varying ages and some people in special pastoral and administrative roles in the diocese including priests, religious women and men, and one emeritus bishop - in all, about 120 people to date. I also received a number of personal written reminiscences and family genealogical collections.

The dimensions of life within a current living community are illuminated by oral testimony derived from interviews in a variety of settings.<sup>8</sup> Throughout 2021, I travelled extensively across some of the 415,000 square kilometres of the Diocese of Rockhampton to interview a cross section of people from all walks of life in their localities and homes. I visited cemeteries, local museums and Historical Society Centres and gathered up many publications of local histories of parishes, schools and districts. Visits to local museums revealed two treatments of religion in local museums. One was an absolute absence of reference that religion ever played a part in the social and cultural fabric of the local district or, and most disconcerting to observe, was that sacred objects belonging to church rituals have started to become museum pieces or are for sale as collectible items.

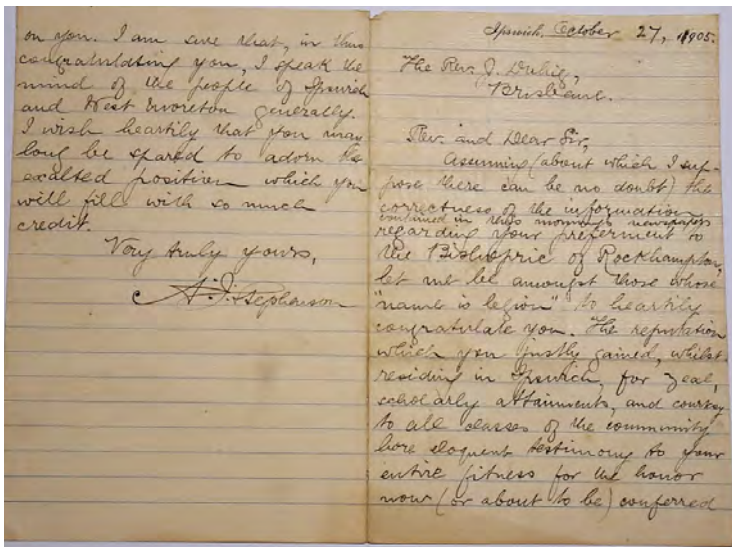


Personal letters from the deep past, in both the Brisbane archdiocesan and Rockhampton diocesan archives reveal the sometimes-difficult personal faith journeys that people experienced as they negotiated the application of Church law in challenging personal circumstances. Some of what I have read or viewed in the archives won't be included in the history and much has landed on the proverbial 'cutting room floor'. There is much humour even in emergencies when there were incidents involving priests and doctors caught up in unforeseen circumstances.

For example, Dr F.A. Hope Michod, a long-term doctor of Longreach in the early 20th century, had a frenzied knock on his door one Saturday morning. A man had ridden miles in from his property with his nine-year-old son. The man was desperate; "My son has swallowed a bullet", he gasped. A priest was called to the surgery. He was coming up the stairs expecting the worst when from up the hallway he heard the doctor giving clear instructions:

“Take your boy home..... load him with castor oil!

and **don't** point him at anybody!”



1905 letter of congratulations from Ipswich Alderman Mr. Alfred John Stephenson to Bishop-elect James Duhig.

There is this letter in the Brisbane Archdiocesan archive from 1905 of a Mr Alfred Stephenson, a council Alderman of Ipswich, Queensland of the early 20th century. The sounds of an old English cockney accent and the 19th century mode of expression resonate in the brief letter. From a historical perspective, I derived from the contents of the letter that there was a deep respect and affection for the then Father James Duhig from people of all walks of life and even from Stephenson, a Freemason and Church of England Council Alderman:

Rev and Dear Sir,

Assuming (about which I suppose there can be no doubt) the correctness of the information confirmed in this morning's newspapers regarding your preferment to the Bishopric of Rockhampton, let me be amongst those whose "name is legion" to heartily congratulate you. The reputation which you justly gained, whilst residing in Ipswich, for zeal, scholarly attainments, and courtesy to all classes of the community bore eloquent testimony to your entire fitness for the honour now (or about to be) conferred on you. I am sure that, in thus congratulating you, I speak the mind of the people of Ipswich and West Moreton generally,

I wish heartily that you may long be spared to adorn the exalted position which you will fill with so much credit.

Very truly yours

A.J.Stephenson

This letter of Stephenson's is one of the many personal exchanges retained in the archives, some of which I include amongst the text in order to establish a more realistic record of the life and times of the people of the diocese.

The chapters in this history of the Rockhampton Diocese are defined by themes rather than by an approach in traditional histories that have tended to be linear and sequenced in order of time. Although each chapter can be



accessed as a stand-alone read and reference, there are chronological threads within each chapter theme. The chapters though long and researched in depth, allow for the personal stories to enhance and inform the topic rather than their being inserted merely as add-ons in set timeframes.

In a section of chapter three on Rites and Rituals of the Church is one example of how the documented history, in this case the history of the rosary, is grounded in diocesan history and brought to life through diaries, personal letters and photos from family albums. I traced the history of the introduction and practice of the rosary through the ages and the records of many personal stories of Catholic practise centred around the recitation of the rosary in the remotest corners of the Rockhampton diocese.

These excerpts from the chapter on Rites and Rituals of the Church, are taken from the diary of a Rockhampton and later Townsville diocesan priest Father Dave O'Meara from 1914, and the personal letters of Mr Joseph Anton Schick from 1934.

I have written:

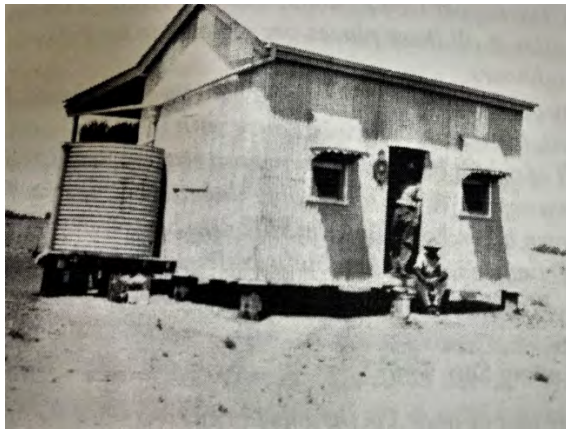
... In 1914 pioneer priest of the Rockhampton Diocese, Father Dave O'Meara often met and camped beside the bullock wagon teams on his journeys inland. The priest recalled during one of these meetings with a teamster along the road,

*Each night before we retired to rest, all on the road with him (the teamster) had to join*

*in the family Rosary, said under the wagon  
or under the tarpaulin.*

One teamster who did the journey from Hughenden to Boulia recalled that there were up to three bullock teams at once on the track. They took three months to get there and, owing to scarcity of water, the return journey took nine months. One teamster kept a diary of his journeys noting the difficulties of the times, such as no water for 100 miles, grass scarce, horses perishing from eating poison weed after rain. Yet all the time religion was central to the man's life. In his diary the teamster recorded,

*Sunday, April 17, 1892, at Blackall.  
"Camped here and went to Mass".<sup>9</sup>*



*1934 Bedourie corrugated iron police station residence and  
watchhouse*

The letters of police constable Joseph Anton Schick (1904-1982), the son of German migrants to Queensland, described how he maintained a commitment to the practices of the Church in the harshest of conditions. In 1934, as a thirty-year-old police constable in the Queensland police force, Joseph was transferred to the remote settlement of Bedourie, approximately 1,600 kilometres from his home in Brisbane.

His rounds also included Birdsville on the Queensland / South Australian border. In one letter he replies to one of his mother's first questions when she inquired if there were a Catholic church at the Bedourie outpost. Joseph replies that the nearest church was '500-600 miles away and that a priest visits once in a blue moon'. Joseph then teases his mother,

*'(I)t looks as if (I) am going to be let go to the dogs'.*

He concludes in his letter,

*(Don't worry mum, I say my prayers night and morning, and say the Rosary every night, and try to be as good as I can and the first chance that I get, I will go to the Sacraments whenever that will (be)...<sup>10</sup>*

In Central and Western Queensland, it would be in conditions similar to the side of the track with the bullock wagons or the Bedourie police station that

itinerant priests celebrated the Mass, conducted the sacraments and carried away the records of baptisms and marriages in their saddlebags. For a brief moment in time, a religious ceremony however basic, through its words of scripture and ritual actions, suspended time and place.

I acknowledge that as a woman and historian, I will have varying perspectives and angles of vision and biases when viewing and interpreting material. I give you a prime example in our own Australian history. In 2014, Australian historian Dr Clare Wright published, *The forgotten rebels of Eureka: a history of the Eureka Stockade*. Eureka is one of Australia's foundation legends - yet the story has always been told as if **half** the participants weren't there. But what if the hot-tempered, free-spirited gold miners we learned about at school, were actually husbands and fathers, brothers and sons? What if there were women and children right there beside them, inside the Stockade when the bullets started to fly? Until Clare Wright's history, why was it not ever included in previous Eureka Stockade narratives that the decorated coffin at the burial confirmed that there was a female amongst the rebels? These omitted details do not exactly change the course of Australian history, but they do serve to illustrate that women historians may see the data in front of them from varying angles and nuances.

Past histories of Church dioceses have been written largely by laymen or clerics, who had an 'insider' access to records of Church affairs and documentation. Archival collections of Dioceses and of Religious Institutes of both the Rockhampton Diocese and the Brisbane Archdiocese

are now more accessible for major projects such as this one. The Church archive collections are the core of research that complements and informs oral history. The letters, photos and documents in these Catholic archives are key elements of the methodology for comparison and verification of oral testimonies. I refer particularly to the archived collection of the once frequent publication of the Rockhampton Diocesan Newsletter called *The Review*. Until recent decades priests were the editors and the weekly editorial was the diocesan teaching tool on all matters catechetical, pastoral and theological.

Past publications of histories of religious faith commitment in the diocese have been commissioned for major events such as centenaries of parishes and schools. There are also comprehensive histories of Central Queensland - such as the works of Dr Lorna McDonald, Marie Reid and Peter and Sheila Forrest and their recent history called *The Rush for Grass*. For Catholic histories of the region I refer particularly to the works of the Rev Dr Tom Boland, Rev Dr Chris Hanlon, Fathers Denis Martin and Noel Milner, Isobel Hoch, Berenice Wright, Dr John Browning, Cathryn King, Elisa Vassallo and Jean-May Wright.

In 1990, Dr John P. Maguire produced *Prologue – A History of the Catholic Church of the Townsville Diocese – 1863-1983*. He was a priest of the Townsville Diocese and after leaving the priesthood was the founding Head of the History Department of James Cook University Townsville. This history of the Townsville Diocese carries the weight literally of a scholarly, thoroughly researched documentary history of significant eras in the

Church and that diocese. It is an important connection to the history of the Rockhampton Diocese because until the 1930s that part of North Queensland was included in this Diocese.

In 2017, Dr Martin Sullivan produced *Saints and Slaves – A History of Catholic Schooling and the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Townsville, North Queensland 1870-1970*. By the title alone this scholarly work is far more accessible as he draws from oral history records, although he personally had not engaged with the people whose stories are included. Once again it records part of Rockhampton’s diocesan history.

Then there are the bigger picture studies on the subject of religion, such as Roy Williams’ *Post God Nation? How religion fell off the radar in Australia – and what might be done to get it back on*. Williams asks, “*what do people believe?*”. He makes a bold statement at the outset that ‘People don’t **know** what they believe’ and that they are ignorant of the very broad basic Christian beliefs and identity such as:

- An all-knowing God who created and sustains the Universe, and who is vitally interested in the thoughts and conduct of each individual human being;
- An afterlife in which each of us will be judged by God;
- The divinity of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>11</sup>

The over-arching focus for reference and research for this history of the Rockhampton Diocese has been on the documents of the theology of the Catholic Church and the connection of a Suffragan Diocese such as Rockhampton to the Universal Church. There are the recent teaching documents by Pope Francis, and in recent years after Vatican II, there are the post-Vatican II document analyses by Queensland's Dr Ormond Rush and by the American theologians Richard Gaillardet and Catherine Clifford.

I refer particularly to the Rockhampton Diocesan production to mark the Centenary of 1982, which was prepared by the Queensland historians Rod Manning now deceased and Berenice Wright from Mackay. The instruction for that centenary production was that it be in magazine format and dimension only. These limitations left very little scope for the inclusion of reminiscences and personal testimonies. At the same time, the format and contents did follow the standard structure for many histories of institutions such as schools and churches. These traditional histories document when institutions were founded and their founders, who were the administrators and prominent high achievers, and what buildings were constructed in their stewardship.

Throughout each chapter where possible, I have brought copies of documents, letters and photos into the body of the work rather than to situate them as appendices as I want to engage the reader personally in this 140-year journey. The reader then is enabled to see and feel and question some of what I as the author am experiencing as I read and research. There is more of an engagement to

appreciate the connections of people, places and conditions that can be gleaned just by noting the handwritten details on the pages of the earliest Marriage and Baptism registers of the diocese. These are moving records of personal commitments of people of the past who engaged with the Church, some made by priest and lay people in the most extraordinary circumstances.

To view handwritten letters from over 100 years is to take a step closer to walking in the shoes of the people of the diocese.

The registers convey a whole range of personal and church experiences of places where marriages were conducted, country of birth, age, current occupations, who could write and the wider social association through the names of witnesses.

100	Frankish	7 March 67	St. James	Ray, Edmund	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
101	John Jones	3 April 67		Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
102	John Jones	21 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
103	John Jones	11 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
104	John Jones	21 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
105	John Jones	11 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
106	John Jones	21 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
107	John Jones	11 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
108	John Jones	21 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
109	John Jones	11 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
110	John Jones	21 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
111	John Jones	11 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
112	John Jones	21 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
113	John Jones	11 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
114	John Jones	21 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
115	John Jones	11 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
116	John Jones	21 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
117	John Jones	11 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
118	John Jones	21 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
119	John Jones	11 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.
120	John Jones	21 April 67	St. James	Ray, P. J.	Conrad, John	Ray, P. J.

*Father Murlay's Baptism register*



In the Baptism registers of Fathers Murlay and Patrick McGuinness, once again there are records of places, parents and sponsors and might I add amazing flowing legible, handwriting.

The letter of Mr. W. J. Long of Mt Morgan to Archbishop Duhig in June of 1960, alerted me to the reality and challenges of publishing histories. William Long's dilemma is real and of vital interest in the approach to publishing and distribution stages of a diocesan history. Mr Long writes,

To His Grace Archbishop Duhig,

My Lord Archbishop,

I would like to draw your attention to a matter, which I consider needs rectifying. The matter I refer to is "Catholic History". Recently I compiled "the Catholic History of Mount Morgan Parish", a copy of which I forwarded to you.

Mons McElhinney when he was parish priest at Mt Morgan asked me to write the history as ill health, age etc prevented him from doing so. I got a thousand copies printed. My reason for getting that many was to sell them at a cheap price of 4/- a copy to the parishioners.

I regret to have to inform you that though their (sic) are approximately 1100 Catholics at Mt Morgan, I sold less than a 100 to them and that was to men on low wages with big families.

The rich ones who always seem to be leading lights on the Church committees did not buy one. However I sold over 100 to non-Catholics who are interested in the history of their town.

As Mount Morgan is in the Rockhampton Diocese I naturally expected to get some support from the rich Catholics in that city as the history of the six bishops is in the booklet. I did not sell 5 dozen copies, which is not surprising as some of the priests are not interested in Catholic history.

I am sure you will hardly believe this statement here are the facts.....

Unfortunately, we do not have the reply from Archbishop Duhig.

A key consideration for a historical record of this dimension is ‘Who is this history for?’ and ‘What is it for?’. One of my more senior interviewees, Mrs Jacky Habermann of Bundaberg, questioned “How big is this book going to be?”

As a history it is an instructive tool and I, as historian, walk a fine line between entertainment, information, intellectual challenges and scholarly interpretation. In the production I include, besides handwritten letters and testimonies, many photos because a pictorial history enhances the impact of the written word. There is a need to explore how a thoroughly researched diocesan history can become a dynamic instrument of source material and become integrated into many in-service areas for diocesan

staff and for student curriculum areas across the Catholic secondary school. Staff and students can make personal discoveries, decisions and interpretations about their Catholic history and their place within the local, national and global contexts as they engage with this primary and secondary source material.<sup>12</sup>

A diocesan history can be informative, instructive and challenging mainly because the people of the diocese past and present come alive across its pages with stories of all human endeavours, of personal faith experiences, and of belonging and commitment. Its summaries and conclusions hopefully contain informative signposts, in that the past has important lessons to be learned for future considerations and enlightenment.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Weekend Australian*, 29-30 October, 2022, p.34.

<sup>2</sup> Janesick, V.J., *Oral History for the Qualitative Researcher: Choreographing the Story*, 1st ed. (New York: The Guildford Press, 2010), p.2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson, Paul, *The Voice of the Past, Oral History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp.101-150.

<sup>5</sup> Goodson, I. and Sikes, P., *Life History Research in Educational Settings: Learning from Lives*, ed. Pat Sikes, *Doing Qualitative Research in Educational Settings* (Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2001), p.17.

<sup>6</sup> Finkelstein, B., "Education Historians as Mythmakers", *Review of Research in Education* 18 (1992), p.288.

<sup>7</sup> Goodson and Sikes, p.16.

<sup>8</sup> Yow, V., *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2005), p.14.

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<sup>9</sup> Father David O'Meara, *Souvenir*, Hughenden, p.13. (Father Dave O'Meara opted to minister in the newly formed Townsville Diocese after the 1930s).

<sup>10</sup> Anton Schick, 1998, p.81.

<sup>11</sup> Roy Williams, *Post God Nation? How Religion Fell Off the Radar in Australia* (Sydney: Harper Collins Publishers, 2015) p.12.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Dyer, "School Archives in the Curriculum," *ACER*, Spring 2008, pp.18-21.