Many historians have been critical of the ways that television presents history, arguing that television histories are superficial, populist and lack complexity. They often criticise documentaries for their poor standards of evidence and accuracy or for their willingness to reinforce, rather than challenge, well-worn historical narratives. Television histories seek to engage audiences on emotional terms, to evoke empathy and to communicate in visual, rather than densely textual ways. Crucially, they also speak to a far broader audience than academic histories: for this reason alone, historians have a vital interest in understanding how television constructs and communicates history. Many of the criticisms made of television histories are based on misrecognition of their role and purpose: television histories and written histories are dramatically different forms of historical narrative, produced for different audiences and constructed in different ways. In this article, I will examine the current state of Australian history on television. What are the distinctive features of popular television histories? How does television communicate history? And finally, how might we take television histories seriously as objects of research? The article argues that we need to go beyond simply critiquing television histories for their failure to do what academic histories do and instead engage with them in ways that takes into account their distinctive modes of production and consumption.

This article has been peer-reviewed.

The year, we have been told, is 1964. We, the audience watching our television screens, see a group of Aboriginal women and children walking across red sand dunes. They are tall, lithe; they move gracefully. They have been filmed by two white men who were sent out to ‘bring them in’ prior to a rocket launch in their country. The Aboriginal women have never seen white people before; this is a moment of ‘first contact’, possibly the
only one recorded on film in Australia. But there is more. We now see and hear one of those women, Yuwali, reflecting on this moment in her past. In the documentary Contact, broadcast by ABC TV, we see and hear Yuwali describing her adolescent reactions to this transformative encounter. While Contact relies heavily on the power of a remarkable piece of footage, it is deployed without sensationalism as the basis of a sensitively crafted history. Yuwali’s extraordinary story has been told before in print, in Sue Davenport, Peter Johnson and Yuwali’s book Cleared Out: First Contact in the Western Desert (2005). Yet the film achieves something more, not least because of its wealth of suggestion. It is a profoundly moving work of history that simultaneously sustains wonder, suspense, humour and sadness. Most remarkably, the film offers the viewer a space for reflection and contemplation – it is difficult for the printed word to achieve such effects. While not made expressly for a television audience, its production was assisted by an ABC presale and the ABC has made an interactive version of the documentary available on its website.  

Contact was directed by Martin Butler and Bentley Dean. It won the best documentary award at the 2009 Sydney Film Festival, the 2009 Prime Minister’s Prize for Australian History, and the Audio-Visual Prize in the 2010 NSW Premiers’ History Awards. According to the film’s website, neither Butler nor Dean have backgrounds in history: Dean studied politics, philosophy and film and television at university, while Butler, who has spent most of his long career working as a current affairs producer, was a politics and economics graduate. Both have distinguished themselves as makers of politically active documentaries and current affairs television. Yet despite their lack of formal training in history, they have produced a film that speaks to so many of the thematic concerns of contemporary historians: cross-cultural contact, colonialism, Indigenous knowledge of country, conflicting memories, the power of visual images as historical sources. Dean and Butler’s Contact is a genuinely polyphonic history. By screening not just on the film festival circuit but also on ABC TV, Contact arguably achieved a greater audience reach than most of the key works of Indigenous history of the last thirty years or so. Historical documentary deserves to be taken seriously by historians precisely because of its public role: it speaks to a far larger audience than we historians could ever hope to


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attract to our scholarly works. Together with other forms of popular history, television histories mediate between the public and the academy. Historians, therefore, have a vital interest in understanding how television constructs and communicates history. In this article, I will examine the current state of Australian history on television. What are the distinctive features of popular television histories? What possibilities does television offer for history and historians? And finally, how might we take television histories seriously as objects of research? I will outline the rise of history on television, its political and production contexts, canvass its defining qualities and suggest a research agenda for Australian television histories.

Australian historians and television

Australian historians have been sharply critical of the ways history is presented on television. Ruth Balint, herself a talented historian/filmmaker, complained that ‘historical documentary-makers are under no obligation to consult with historians about content, even where they have received public funds to produce their histories’.³ Ann McGrath similarly noted that ‘except as talking heads, the historians undertaking the latest research are rarely consulted’, arguing that this revealed ‘an arrogant undervaluing of historical expertise’.⁴ Both have called for historians to take a more active role in shaping television histories through the acquisition of filmmaking skills. Yet McGrath and Balint are rare in their interest in documentary: one of the characteristics of the Australian historical profession’s engagement with film and television has been to neglect documentary altogether. Many historians have explored the ways that Australian cinema and television drama has depicted Australian history.⁵ Australian history documentary is yet to be accorded the same

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kind of scholarly attention, which is remarkable when we consider that American, European and British historians have written extensively on television histories. While several historians have considered the impact of history in non-academic contexts more broadly, they have done so without explicit attention to film and television.

This is not to suggest that the history profession has completely failed to engage with television histories. Many Australian history journals (including *History Australia* and *Labour History*) regularly review documentaries, and indeed, many historians participate in documentaries as advisors and interviewees – some, such as Michael Cathcart and Clare Wright, have worked on history documentaries more directly, appearing onscreen as presenters and writing scripts. The NSW Premier’s History Awards have included an audio-visual category since their inception in 1997 and the Prime Minister’s Prize for Australian History is open to films and other media, unlike many of the history categories in the state-based literary awards, most of which are open only to history ‘books’. Many history departments teach ‘history on film’ units but the University of NSW offers a unit on ‘Documentary film and history’, and the Monash unit ‘History, Film and TV in 20th century Australia’ looks at documentary as well as feature films. These are all signs that the historical profession is beginning to take seriously the presentation of

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histories on television – as a way to communicate research to a broad audience, to foster historical understanding among our students and to recognise non-textual means of communicating history. However, there are still more reasons for paying close attention to television histories.

According to the *Australians and the Past* survey, more Australians find out about the past from film and television than from almost any other source: 84 per cent of respondents said they had watched movies or television as a means of engaging with the past.\(^\text{10}\) Even this imprecise statistic (we do not know whether this indicates film or television, drama or documentary viewing) is evidence that far more people consume history in images than in books. To take just one example: Peter Butt’s documentary *Who Killed Dr Bogle and Mrs Chandler?* – which offered a well-researched and plausible ‘solution’ to the mystery of the couple’s death on New Years’ Day, 1963 – was the second highest rating documentary of 2006, attracting 1.7 million viewers on the ABC.\(^\text{11}\) Even bestselling history books cannot compete with these numbers in terms of sales: most academic history books typically have print runs of two to five thousand. Considering the influence that history on television exerts on public understandings of history, we ignore it at our peril. As American historian David Harlan pointed out in his examination of the work of US documentary maker Ken Burns, if we fail to consider popular history, we ‘will entomb ourselves in a pyramid of irrelevance. After all, it is we academic historians who are in danger of becoming a priestly caste, not the historians who write novels and produce documentaries’.\(^\text{12}\) Looking closely at popular histories can tell us a great deal about how history is understood outside the academy. In the last decade, when the public meaning of Australia’s past was the subject of intense debate, such an understanding is even more critical for Australian historians.

As I have already suggested, historians are quick to criticise popular histories, especially those on television, and often these criticisms have real merit. History on film – and especially television – has been condemned as superficial, populist, and lacking complexity. Documentaries are often criticised for their poor standards of evidence and accuracy, or for their willingness to reinforce, rather than challenge,
well-worn historical narratives. Television documentary in particular is governed by quite rigid conventions of style and content that can work to curtail complexity and which reinforce, rather than challenge, dominant ideologies. Television producers work within a discourse that typically makes (often extravagant) truth claims, which tends to make historians uneasy. Documentary is also maligned for its supposedly excessively emotional and subjective orientation. One of the key characteristics of most forms of popular history (documentaries and dramas, historical fiction, popular non-fiction and memorialisation) is their attempt to engage with audiences in emotional ways: to visualise the past, evoke emotion and create figures of identification. While academic histories may be underpinned by subjectivity – Bain Attwood insisted that ‘historians usually have a transferential relationship to the past we study’ – scholars tend to disavow these emotional underpinnings, and evoking emotion is not considered a historian’s primary task. The sense of emotional connection that popular histories aim to evoke – the idea that the viewer can know what those in the past thought and felt – runs counter to most historians’ notions of historical understanding: in her critique of historical fiction, Inga Clendinnen argued that ‘however seductive they might be, the “insights” of empathy are untestable’. Yet empathy and emotion are central to contemporary popular histories. Documentary theorist John Corner notes that popular histories on television seek to engage audiences in understanding the materiality of the past by stimulating the imagination: indeed, imaginative engagement is essential to reading contemporary documentary, which relies in part on suggestion and metaphor. Television histories appeal to the emotions as sources of understanding: Corner argues that they ‘involve connection with the moods and subjectivities of the past’ and that ‘the combination of “distant” materiality and forms of subjectivity at once both alien and familiar … is one that television has been able to articulate more powerfully than any other medium’. Historians are still coming to terms with what this combination of the alien and familiar

13 See, for example, de Groot, 151; McGrath; Tom Stearn, ‘What’s wrong with television history?’, History Today 52, no. 12 (December 2002), 26–28; Tristram Hunt, ‘Reality, identity and empathy: the changing face of social history television’, Journal of Social History 39, no. 3 (2006), 843–858.
14 Bain Attwood, Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2005), 181.
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might mean for popular understandings of history and for our methods of communicating our research.

Sarah Pinto noted recently that historical novels make their pasts known on emotional terms, but the role of emotion in shaping historical understanding in other kinds of histories requires more analysis. These are the sorts of questions we need to bring to our television histories – to go beyond ‘is it accurate?’ and instead ask ‘how does it work and why is it popular?’ In the UK, Ann Gray and Erin Bell are currently conducting a large research project on British television histories, starting with the question ‘how do we get the kinds of television history that we do?’ We need to ask this and other questions of our own television history: how does television history structure its narratives? What sorts of stories are told and why? How might we engage more closely with historical documentary beyond merely criticising it for not doing what we as academic historians do? What do audiences take from these kinds of histories? In a public culture where historians are still grappling with the postmodernist challenge to their authority to ‘know’ the past on the one hand, and a desire to assert their expertise in response to the challenge of the history wars on the other, historians understandably regard television histories with suspicion. However, as the example of Contact suggests, there are things that we historians can learn from film and television representations of the past. There are things that documentary can do that written histories cannot.

The recent history of history on television

The recent success of history on television is commonly attributed to the documentaries associated with the American documentarian Ken Burns and British ‘telly-don’ Simon Schama. Both have played a crucial role in the reinvigoration of television as a medium for communicating histories. Harlan described Burns as ‘the most famous historian in the country’: more than 23 million people watched the first two episodes of his Civil War series, and Burns himself estimates that as many as one hundred million people have watched the entire 12 hour series (in re-broadcasts and on video and DVD). Simon Schama’s History of Britain, too, found a wide audience: its ratings came close to a 20 per cent audience share, a feat which Schama declared ‘moved history back into the common public

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18 Bell and Gray, 113–133.
19 Harlan, 169.
culture where it rightly belonged’.\textsuperscript{20} While different in style, both Burns’ and Schama’s history series offered sweeping narrative histories that spoke to audience desires for unifying historical accounts in fractured, contemporary times.\textsuperscript{21} The unexpected success of Schama’s \textit{History of Britain} transformed television history into a media phenomenon,\textsuperscript{22} not just in Great Britain but also in Australia, where it first screened on SBS in 2001. The success of \textit{A History of Britain}, David Starkey’s \textit{Monarchy} and programs such as the BBC’s \textit{Seven Wonders of the Industrial World} transported the British history boom to Australia. By the mid-2000s, history had new appeal to both broadcasters and audiences in Australia: both the ABC and SBS had some success with ‘reality history’ (\textit{Outback House} and \textit{The Colony}, both 2005),\textsuperscript{23} and the ABC experimented with a ‘magazine’ history program, \textit{Rewind}, in the same year.\textsuperscript{24} After almost a decade of funding cuts for the ABC, managing director Russell Balding framed a public appeal for increased government funds in terms of the need to emulate overseas television histories:

Those Starkey and Schama programs, whose production budgets deliver a visual richness and grand style that is evident every single minute on the screen, are what we are now accustomed to ... No matter how great our patriotism, no one will watch a program simply because it’s Australian history – the production benchmark must be reached.\textsuperscript{25}

Balding based his plea for funding on the premise that televsual history was a valuable nation-building tool. However, according to Balding, Australians wanted their televsual history to be entertaining and ‘visually rich’. In effect, the Howard government responded to this call when it granted $7.5 million to Film Australia in 2005 to create the Making History initiative, the ABC broadcasting the resulting ten documentaries during 2007–09.

The Making History initiative was significant for several reasons: it was the largest single government grant ever given to a television project\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{21} Hunt, 844.
\textsuperscript{22} de Groot, 17.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Outback House}. Produced by Ivo Burum, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005; \textit{The Colony}. Produced by Hilton Cordell productions for SBS Independent, Radio Telefis Éireann and the History Channel UK, 2005.
\textsuperscript{24} Arrow, ‘That history should not have ever been how it was’, 54–66; Michelle Arrow, ‘“Television program yes, history no”: doing Australian history on \textit{Rewind}, \textit{History Australia} 2, no. 2 (June 2005), 46.1–46.6.
\textsuperscript{26} Balint.
and it was significant because no definitive ‘history of Australia’ has yet been made for television: the closest equivalent to such a history to date is First Australians. The ten documentaries broadcast as part of Making History ranged from the colonial history Rogue Nation (2009), the three part engineering history Constructing Australia (2007), a trilogy of mid-twentieth century political biographies (Menzies and Churchill at War, Infamous Victory: Ben Chifley’s Battle for Coal, The Prime Minister is Missing (all 2008)), the re-enactment-based Mawson: Life and Death in Antarctica (2008), and finally, Monash: The Forgotten Anzac (2008). 27 The most distinctive characteristic of the Making History films was their reliance on dramatisation, about which I will say more below. This was in sharp contrast to the other key television history of recent years, Rachel Perkins and Darren Dale’s Indigenous history of Australia, First Australians (2008), which eschewed reenactment in favour of atmospheric images of landscape, extensive use of Perkins’ voiceover and evocative treatment of a vast archival record. 28 However, both the Making History films and First Australians focused on heroic individuals with whom the audience could form emotional connections, although this had different political effects: one reinforced conventional history narratives, while the other posited a new roster of national heroes. In the wake of the first Making History films and First Australians, Australian histories on television have continued to proliferate: Screen Australia (having subsumed Film Australia) was given further government funding for more Making History documentaries and has so far produced Kokoda (2010) and The Extraordinary Tale of William Buckley (2009), while a program about the campaign for female suffrage, Utopia Girls, is in production, and a film about Aboriginal warrior Jandamarra has been completed. 29 In 2010, the ABC also broadcast The Making of Modern Australia, which offered a


more inclusive, participatory experience, with a website inviting people to contribute their stories and an emphasis on how ‘ordinary’ Australians have experienced the historical changes of the postwar period. Significantly, however, it did not appear under the ‘Making History’ banner, which has been reserved for heroic, public, nation-building stories about explorers, politicians and engineers.30

Framing television histories: broadcasting, politics, culture

It is impossible to separate our television history ‘boom’ from the historiographical and material circumstances of the 2000s. The history wars framed public debates about Australian history. As Prime Minister, John Howard was an active protagonist in these debates, promoting a positive, nationalist version of Australia’s past through interventions in public debates over the National Museum of Australia, the teaching of history in schools and the cutting of funding to the ABC and universities.31 Ann Curthoys remarked in 2006 that the Howard government valued history that stressed ‘achievements rather than difficulties’ and had ‘little time for social history, for women’s history, for environmental history, or for Indigenous history, when it actually has implications for action in the present’.32 In public debates around history, historians were often dismissed as biased ‘fabricators’ and their authority to speak about Australian history was undermined and challenged.33 The Making History initiative represented a significant government intervention into the public presentation of history: at least one of the films (on Sir John Monash) was made at the direct request of the Arts Minister, Rob Kemp.34 While several historians have recounted the many examples of the Howard government’s attempts to reshape Australian history, none of these accounts have considered the role of television documentary in this reshaping.35 Ruth Balint, however, traced


34 John Hirst, Recorded interview, 21 April 2010.

35 Bonnell and Crotty; Curthoys; Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, The History Wars (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003).
the genesis of the Making History initiative to the history wars, arguing that the films were ‘intended to created a specific metahistory of the Australian past through the topics that were chosen and, equally, those that were not ... to ignore [the question of race] in the commissioning process was inherently political’.36

The other key lens through which we need to view televisual histories is an industrial one: we must understand the changing circumstances of documentary production. Television has gradually become more important as a funding source and broadcast outlet for independent documentary, thanks to documentary funding models that require television presales.37 Changes to the culture and outlook of public broadcasting have therefore had serious implications for history on television. Funding pressures have pushed the ABC and other public broadcasters worldwide into a market orientation where success is increasingly measured by ratings, rather than public interest.38 Since 2008, there has been no in-house documentary production at the ABC and this means that the freedom to produce formally innovative, strongly political or overtly authored documentaries there has largely disappeared.39 The production of history television has been outsourced to external production companies, who work to commissions from the broadcasters. Commissioning editors have become more important – and more risk-averse – as the pressure to attract large audiences assumes greater importance. Changes in the meaning and experience of ‘documentary’ as ‘diversion’ (heralded by the widespread popularity of reality TV) have complicated and transformed the meaning of documentary for audiences.40 Broadcasters’ assumptions about audiences have also shaped documentary. According to the Australian Film Commission, documentaries attract a small, older section of the population. On average, 1.8 per cent, or 251 000 people, watch free-to-air documentaries, with 72 per cent of the viewers aged 40

36 Balint.
39 FitzSimons, 180.
and over. However a second, arguably larger audience is suggested by the fact that documentaries make up 45 per cent of programs communicated to the more than four million students in Australian classrooms.\(^{41}\) An older, male audience tends to be both assumed and reinforced by commissioning editors, especially through the choice of subjects: of the 34 documentaries commissioned and broadcast by the ABC between 2006 and 2009, including the first Making History films, eleven were concerned with the world wars, eleven were biographical films about men, and only two featured female subjects (ABC TV documentaries, 2010). Yet Tony Bennett’s research into the preferences of British audiences suggests that men are only slightly more likely than women to watch ‘high-legitimacy’ programs such as documentaries.\(^{42}\) While no equivalent research has been done on Australian audiences, the *Australians and the Past* survey suggested that women were more concerned with Australian and Indigenous history than men, who showed a greater preference for world history.\(^{43}\) This suggests that women represent a significant potential audience for Australian historical stories, although Australian history documentaries which foreground women’s experiences are rare. The flourishing of history on television in the last decade has occurred in an increasingly market-oriented industry, which has influenced not only the content of historical programs, but transformed the conditions of their production.

**Characteristics of television histories**

I will now consider the key qualities and features of contemporary history on television, drawing largely on Australian examples. Corner argues that there are four modes of portrayal available for television histories: commentary, where the viewing experience is structured by a voiceover; presenter, which responds to the demand for ‘personalised’ history; testimony, which relies on the act of recollection; and re-enactment or dramatisation, which attempts to resolve the major absence in historical documentaries – that is, the fact that most events depicted in historical television have not been captured on film.\(^{44}\) Considering the success and popularity of ‘reality’ history programs such as *1900 House* and *Who do you think you are?*, perhaps we could add a fifth mode: actuality, where history

\(^{41}\) Laughren, 119,126.

\(^{42}\) Tony Bennett, ‘Distinction on the box: cultural capital and the social space of broadcasting’, *Cultural Trends* 15, no. 2/3 (2006), 205–207.

\(^{43}\) Hamilton and Ashton, 8.

\(^{44}\) Corner, ‘Once upon a time’, 14–17.
is both discovered and performed by ‘ordinary’ people in the present day, usually with the assistance of historians. Thus the first characteristic of history television (at the risk of stating the obvious) is that it is diverse and complex: Australian history on television is an increasingly hybrid genre, with reality re-enactment based programs such as *The Colony* and *Outback House*, the dramatised, presenter-led documentary *Rogue Nation*, the poetic commentary-mode *First Australians*, the testimony-based *Making of Modern Australia*, the SBS history quiz program *ADbc*.45 While the screen presence of historians varies enormously in these productions, historians are usually credited as researchers and advisors, regardless of whether they appeared onscreen. Indeed, unlike the largely solitary enterprise of the historian, history on television is deeply collaborative and utilises multiple forms of address (location shots, interviewees, photographs, computer-generated imagery, archival documents, sound, editing, script, music). As de Groot commented, ‘the very formal complexity of historical documentary challenges the blithe assertion that television history is overly simplistic’.46 Even in Australia’s smaller broadcasting environment, the diversity of history on television is clear. The second characteristic of history television is that it is largely the preserve of public broadcasters (the ABC and SBS), which both have a charter commitment to inform, educate and entertain their audiences.47 History on the free-to-air commercial networks tends towards the heavily nostalgic, particularly the ‘countdown’ programs such as *Twenty to One* (2005–10, Nine network) or *Talkin’ About your Generation* (2009–10, Ten network), which revisit the popular culture of the recent past to frame understandings of historical change. The History Channel, available only to Foxtel subscribers in Australia, draws heavily on its American parent for its content and tends not to feature a significant amount of local programming – indeed, it is known colloquially as the ‘Hitler channel’ for its extensive screening of World War II documentaries.48

47 The SBS charter states that ‘the principal function of SBS is to provide multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians’, while the ABC charter obliges it to ‘broadcast programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community; and broadcast programs of an educational nature’. Special Broadcasting Services Act 1991, Section 6. Available from: http://www.sbs.com.au/shows/aboutus/tab-listings/page/i/2/h/Corporate/; Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act, 1983, Section 6, 1a (i, ii). Available from: http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/ABCharter.htm.
However, Australian viewers are eager consumers of imported history programs, and public broadcasters also screen a significant number of foreign documentaries: while figures specifying the number of history documentaries broadcast are not collected by Screen Australia, in 2008–09, for example, the ABC screened 566 hours of documentaries, 185 hours of which were Australian, and we can safely assume many of these were history programs.\(^{49}\) This means that audience understandings of Australian history and Australian history documentary are partly refracted through their experience of American, British and European history documentary.

The third characteristic of television histories emerges from their domestic context. Television is ubiquitous in most Australian homes: virtually every Australian household has one or more television sets, while on any given day during 2007, an average of 13.4 million Australians, almost two thirds of the population, watched television.\(^{50}\) Broadcast television also offers a viewing experience distinct from cinema, radio or the internet: unlike cinema, television is able to present multi-part series that develop sustained narratives over several weeks (although with the increasing availability of series on DVD and online, this practice of meting out weekly instalments of programs by broadcasters is being gradually undermined). Television lacks the interactivity of the internet or even DVD, but it can offer large continuous narratives, unlike the discontinuous online narratives, where information is broken into small parts and viewers can choose the order in which it is viewed. Indeed, considering the domestic distractions facing television viewers, perhaps television narratives need a greater clarity and simplicity than other documentary narratives. Television is domestic and intimate, free-to-air programs can be watched without cost (once a television set has been purchased) and it affords opportunities for sociability. The idea of the television as an electronic hearth, as a means to bind families together, has existed since television’s introduction, as has the conviction that television can offer both entertainment and education.\(^{51}\) History on television exemplifies this tendency to edifying entertainment: a review


of *Constructing Australia: Pipe Dreams* declared that the program was ‘a great piece of television. It is the kind every parent should endeavour to sit the family in front of, to better understand the sheer scope of the project which changed the state, and indeed the nation, for ever’. Television history is expected to be both instructive and emotionally engaging. So how does it bridge this divide between intimacy and education?

Television histories create visual, empathetic and synthesised narratives about the past. Television must communicate ideas with images, which presents an immediate problem for history: how can producers find images of events that were never recorded, or account for a scarcity of images? The producers of *History of Britain* overcame the problem of a shortage of archival footage – and a tight budget – with the heavy use of visual metaphors and symbols, which, Schama argued, gave the audience space to imagine the things they could not see. Other filmmakers have elevated the still image to the centre of their works: Ken Burns is the best-known practitioner of this type of television history, and his use of images and evocative voice-overs gives his documentaries an instantly recognisable style. His method was a strong influence on *First Australians*: Perkins and Dale met with Burns when developing their storytelling style. Ellie Rennie wrote that their ‘use of slow zooms and the repetition of well-chosen images inscribe in the viewer a visual memory’ and, indeed, this visual consistency helps viewers link together the disparate stories that unfold on screen as parts of a larger history.

The need to communicate visually without archival footage has encouraged many filmmakers to turn to dramatised re-enactments. Dramatised documentaries offer two experiences to viewers: documentary’s promise of actuality and drama’s promise of understanding through ‘second order’ experience. Tobias Ebbrecht argued that the combination of documentary and fictional modes of representation corresponds to the audience’s desire to see their understanding of history confirmed by evidence: ‘the images function as representatives for historical truth and create evidence for the spectator to believe what

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52 Pam Casellas, ‘Vision was not just a pipe dream’, *The West Australian*, 23 March 2007, 5.
53 Schama, 14.
is seen’. Consequently, much of the debate around dramatisations in documentary hinges on the question of authenticity. The presence of actors in documentary is problematic, because, as Derek Paget argues, ‘the actor is and must remain the visible sign of docudrama’s essential inauthenticity as documentary’. Yet as documentary theorist Bill Nichols pointed out, archival footage is all too readily accepted as authentic and rarely is the provenance of footage explicitly authenticated. He cautioned against the dismissal of dramatisations, asking: ‘how is a re-enactment less authentic than a recounting? ... Is the spoken word not a re-enactment in its own right, aided by hindsight and motivated by a point of view?’

While oral testimony is less fraught as a means of historical re-creation than dramatisation, because recollections are clearly the creations of those recounting them on screen, recollections and dramatisations are, nonetheless, complex cultural creations, mediated by history, memory and the understanding of the past the creator wishes to convey.

Dramatisations are powerful because they not only visualise history, they can connect viewers with the people and emotions of the past. Director Peter Butt emphasised their persuasive power when he explained that he used dramatisation to ‘make the audience suspend disbelief’ as they would when watching a drama. Utilising actors on screen rather than documents, dramatisation offers the promise of embodied intimacy. It can complicate the ‘great man’ narratives of history by showing the frustrations and passions of historical actors, rather than merely reiterating their ‘greatness’ as captured on archival footage. In *Menzies and Churchill at War*, for example, we follow wartime Prime Minister Menzies to London and witness his clashes with Churchill over his conduct of the war. Menzies, the founder of the Liberal Party, is commonly caricatured in the Australian popular imagination as a forelock-tugging Empire man, and the film’s significant achievement is that it complicates this view to depict Menzies as a ‘rough Colonial’ (in his daughter’s words), challenging Churchill and fighting passionately for Australia’s interests. These new insights into Menzies’ emotional life are fostered by the film’s reliance on his diaries and home movies. Dramatisation’s popularity is perhaps

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60 Schwartz, 12.
also attributable to the continued popularity of historical films, which routinely offer insights into large historical events through a focus on a few characters. Robert Rosenstone pointed out that popular historical film ‘emotionalises, personalises and dramatises history’ and a similar effect arguably applies in dramatised historical documentaries. Of course, the danger in dramatisation is that speculation can become solidified into fact, that dramatisations become ‘background decoration to the “absolute truth” of the narrative’, as Balint puts it. But the demands of the medium, not just the demands of broadcasters or their political masters, mean that narratives remain at the heart of television histories. Quibbles about the accuracy or truth effects of dramatisations are valid, but perhaps beside the point: historian Justin Champion remarked on the use of (admittedly more abstract) dramatised re-enactment in A History of Britain that ‘the function of these pictures is to make us see history and think about it; it is not to provide a reconstruction of the past “as it was”’. Many academic historians share such a goal, so why do they have such limited enthusiasm for television histories?

Dramatisations play a crucial role in visualising the past in history documentary. They also contribute to the creation of a subjective, immediate narrative mode that is characteristic of history on television more broadly. Documentary, as Rosenstone noted, ‘wants you to feel and care deeply about the events and people of the past‘ and it has a range of devices at its disposal to engage the viewer, including narrative, images, sound, music and voice. Ken Burns is probably the most overt in his admission that he aims to evoke emotion in order to draw audiences to history, arguing that ‘we are brought to our history … with story, memory, anecdote, feeling’. As Harlan notes, ‘this is not how academic history works, of course, but it is how popular history works’. One of the most pleasurable aspects of watching history documentary is the way it engenders a sense of emotional access to the past: we see the filmmaker unfold their history onscreen and we feel anger, sadness and hope. While emotions can function as a somewhat illusory form of knowledge (we cannot know what Chifley must have felt when he sent troops into the coal mines in 1949), emotions can also be powerful triggers of action or

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62 Balint.
63 Champion, 165.
64 Robert Rosenstone, History on Film/Film as History (Harlow: Longman/Pearson, 2006), 74.
65 Harlan, 174.
understanding. How many viewers of The Making of Modern Australia found their expectations of an hour of comfortable nostalgia about their own childhoods disrupted by Donna Meehan’s tale of her removal from her family? Or conversely, felt included in the narrative of ‘Modern Australia’ by the presence of her story? While the ‘reality history’ program Outback House paid cursory, untroubling attention to the fact that the participants were re-enacting frontier conquest (if not conflict), the experiences of tenaged Aboriginal maid Danielle offered a quiet counterpoint to this revisioning of the past. Danielle told her mother of having had ‘so much déjà vu its not funny, and I swear its because I know that ... people who are related to me have been here already’. A sense of Indigenous prior occupation, of an Aboriginal history connected to this place, was quietly established. On the other hand, a failure to be emotionally authentic can mean a documentary misses its mark. Rogue Nation, the last of the first tranche of Making History films to be screened by the ABC, overreached emotionally and tipped into melodrama, the product of poor acting and bad dialogue. Attempting to engage an audience on an emotional level carries risks. Achieving a sense of immediacy may make an audience mistakenly think they understand the past in emotional terms, and I am conscious of Clendinnen’s admonishment of Kate Grenville for her hubris in suggesting the novelist’s emotional imaginings of the past could lead to greater historical understanding.  

But documentary can help us foster emotional connections with the past, and these connections can help us understand why the past matters today. These understandings can be illusory, anesthetising or deceitful: but when deployed with sensitivity and scholarly rigour, emotions can be powerful sources of historical understanding.

While dramatisation has become a popular narrative strategy for both its visualising and empathy-inducing qualities, the other strategy employed by producers to structure and unfold historical narratives has been to use a presenter – often a well-known historian – to guide the viewer. The presenter mode can work to frame the program as a personal, subjective view of the past. The onscreen presence of a historian, such as Simon Schama in A History of Britain or Michael Cathcart in Rogue Nation, lends their historical authority to the narrative, offering legitimacy and credibility to the project.  

Typically, this authority is masculine, as Erin Bell has pointed out, although Rachel Perkins offers a powerful counterpoint: even though she never appears onscreen in

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66 Clendinnen.
67 Bell and Gray, 125.
First Australians, her distinctive voice-over signifies her authorship of the series.68 These narrative strategies all tend, in different ways, to underplay or marginalise the role of academic historians. Often, a producer shapes the televisual history, and historians appear as talking heads, or not at all. But historians worry about television histories not simply because they are marginalised in them, although the failure of television to adequately convey ‘serious historical discourse’, as Herman puts it, is a common criticism.69 Historians are concerned with the ways that television histories deploy their institutional and visual power to tell closed stories which reduce the past to plot: ‘unreflective narratives rather than problems drive the programmes forward, and the need for a clear plot mandates the absolute concealment of the apparatus of construction and the lionising of the aspiration to definitiveness’.70 While presenter-led programs, with their personalised and subjective narrative mode, move away from what Finney calls the ‘invisible omniscience’ of older documentaries, where the viewer is guided by a disembodied voice, they nonetheless offer a single point of identification for the audience.71 Yet these apparently ‘definitive’ narratives may serve a useful, indeed vital function for audiences. As Tessa Morris-Suzuki has pointed out, watching television broadcasts (as opposed to watching programs on DVD), viewers are unable to reverse the narrative flow and refer back to earlier scenes (as readers can with books), which means the narrative usually needs to be simple enough for audiences to follow.72 While this view perhaps underestimates the ability of the audience to follow complex narratives, we must remember that few viewers watch television under the same, distraction-free conditions in which they read a book or view a film at the cinema.

Television histories have been widely criticised by historians and commentators for a range of reasons: for their superficiality and drive for narrative rather than analysis, as I noted above, for their subjective perspective on the past, their lack of engagement with historians and the conservative understandings of history they supposedly engender.

Some of these criticisms have real merit: many television histories are guilty of offering simple narratives of the past that serve up soothing

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68 Erin Bell, “No one wants to be lectured at by a woman” – women and history on TV, Women’s History Magazine, no. 59, 4–12.
69 Gerald Herman, ‘Creating the twenty-first century historian for all seasons’, The Public Historian 25, no. 3 (2003), 95.
70 Patrick Finney, ‘Who speaks for history?’, Rethinking History 9, no. 4 (December 2005), 515.
71 Ibid.
histories that reaffirm received wisdom, rather than offering new insights. The disjuncture between history in the media and academic history is also a matter for serious concern. Rose and Corley worry that Ken Burns is replacing scholars as a source of historical analysis, and they ask ‘how is the profession, let alone the nation, served by students and a general public that has learned to equate history with bland films that are isolated from scholarship?’ I will return to the question of the impact of television histories, but some criticisms of television history are based on misrecognition of its role and purpose. Television histories and written histories are dramatically different forms of historical narrative, yet many of the criticisms either assume they are the same or that the sins of filmmakers do not apply to scholarly historians. For example, Rose and Corley quote disapprovingly a historian’s comment on Burns’ interviewing style: ‘he lets you know his expectations right off the bat. He wants sentence answers, and he cuts you off if the answers go into the typical professorial.’ Yet how is this different from the ways that historians quote selectively from their sources? There is a considerable degree of mistrust and mutual disdain between historians and media professionals, as Herman noted:

many historians regard history-based media producers as manufacturers of popular myths that overly simplify and distort ‘true’ history. And many media producers regard professional historians as nit-picking pedants who speak only to one another, shifting the discipline’s centre away from the human stories that make the past both interesting and important to audiences.

This mutual distrust emerges from very real differences between the work of the media and that of the historian, and perhaps from the fact that neither is entirely clear about what the other’s work involves. Not all media professionals have training in history and very few historians understand the many processes a filmmaker must master to craft a historical narrative for television. Few mainstream media professionals have demonstrated a willingness to engage with the new kinds of historical practice sparked by the postmodern challenge to the discipline: contemporary television histories generally lack self-reflexivity (so, for that matter, do many academic histories). However, the charge of subjectivity, often levelled at television histories, denies the fact that historians themselves produce

73 Vivien Ellen Rose and Julie Corley, ‘A trademark approach to the past: Ken Burns, the historical profession, and assessing popular representations of the past’, The Public Historian 25, no. 3 (2003), 54.
74 Wagner, cited in Rose and Corley, 53.
75 Herman, 94.
histories framed by subjectivity. As Justin Champion points out, the criticisms historians and filmmakers have of each other’s work are both truthful and representative of mutual misunderstanding: ‘both historians and documentary-makers aim at achieving an engagement with the truth of the past: they simply have different methods and instruments for getting there.’ But television histories seek to engage a much broader audience, and to do this, they need to communicate historical stories in televisual, rather than textual, ways.

The way ahead

Despite the misgivings of many historians, I think we have reason to be optimistic about the future of history on television. Most significantly, we should be encouraged by the fact that there is much more local history on our screens than there was even a decade ago. In the wake of the first Making History initiative, which has rightly been criticised for its narrow focus on ‘dead white males’, there have been more encouraging signs of a greater pluralism in television histories: First Australians and The Making of Modern Australia are just two documentary series which offer a more inclusive approach and which expand the parameters of Australian history on television. Some historians have called for historians to have greater involvement in television histories, arguing that history on television will only improve if historians participate. Filmmakers in turn have also called for historians to have a more considered relationship to television: Australian documentary maker John Hughes suggested that while filmmakers could display greater rigour in their history documentaries, academics could offer a more informed engagement with film and TV. As film scholar Dirk Eitzen noted wryly, ‘historians and film scholars have an admirable if somewhat impractical tendency to talk to each other about how filmmakers ought to make films’. There are historians who are keen to engage and participate in the communication of historical knowledge through the media. However, not all historians wish to be filmmakers – as Schama pointed out, any historian who wants to be more than just a consultant or a talking head in a documentary

76 Champion, 155.
77 Balint; Andrews.
78 Balint; McGrath, 189–199.
'needs to be prepared to accept the chastening role of a raw novice in the learning of a new craft', and not all have the time or patience for such a commitment.\(^{81}\) So what else can we, as historians, do to bridge the gap between university historians and broadcasters?

The first thing we can do is to think about what the media wants and needs of us as historian-experts. The dominance of dramatic re-enactment in mainstream history documentaries has to some extent displaced the authority of the historian, as I suggested earlier. While *First Australians* was based on the research of many historians, who were acknowledged in the closing credits of each episode, only a few appeared in the episodes themselves. Yet we need not be centre stage in order to have our influence felt and our research respected. We also need to have more respect for the craft and skill involved in creating history documentaries, and this means engaging in film criticism and analysis, training our students to analyse history in the media and fostering dialogue between media professionals and historians. David Harlan argued that where we once assumed that we needed to teach our students how to read academic history, this is not what our students need anymore ... A new history is being written outside the academy by novelists, autobiographers, memoirists and filmmakers. If we intend to meet the challenge of this new history, if we want our students to develop historical imaginations that are morally sustaining and politically relevant, we must teach them to be thoughtful, reflective and resourceful readers of *all* the forms in which American society represents the past to itself. Academic history is one of those forms, of course, but it is only one, and it is neither the most interesting nor the most important.\(^{82}\)

According to Harlan and Herman, the way forward is engagement, and perhaps this means engagement with a little humility thrown in. In his review of Robert Brent Toplin’s *History By Hollywood*, Robert Sklar asked: ‘by what authority does an academic historian assert power over how filmmakers interpret history? Isn’t it just as likely that the history film and ‘traditional scholarship’ in history are two entirely different domains, with their own rules and discourses?’\(^{83}\) Sklar was writing about the considerable body of scholarship by historians critiquing representations of history in cinema, but his question remains pertinent to historians considering the ‘problem’ of documentary.

\(^{81}\) Schama, 21.  
\(^{82}\) Harlan, 184.  
How then, might we go about engaging with television histories in our research? Ann Gray and Erin Bell are currently undertaking a large-scale analysis of British television history production, interviewing those involved in producing television histories, and they too have called for more detailed production studies of specific programs as a means of understanding television history.\textsuperscript{84} Paul Kerr’s account of his role as producer of a television documentary about slavery is a fascinating insight into the ways contemporary history television is driven by ‘emotionality’ and discovery in the present, rather than dwelling in the archives.\textsuperscript{85} We need more of these kinds of accounts: not just to reinforce our understandings of the economic realities which govern television production, but to genuinely engage with media producers, to discover their attitudes towards history and historians. As Bell points out, ‘little is known about the processes whereby representations of the past are mediated, shaped and transformed through television’.\textsuperscript{86} If we ever hope to shape television histories, we need first to understand how they are made.

The other aspect of any future research agenda should address the question of audiences. Historians are concerned that, if the public largely understands the past through film and television, they are not getting reliable history. Yet we know little about how audiences apprehend these histories. Ken Burns claimed that almost all the letters he received from viewers recounted how his programs inspired them to trace their personal connections with the history he depicted.\textsuperscript{87} Clearly Burns’ sample is deeply skewed but the responses themselves are suggestive of an active, rather than passive engagement with the program: viewing his series made some viewers go out and discover more of their history. Champion argues that this is the function of television history – ‘to attract the viewer to plunge into the deeper reaches of knowledge about the past’\textsuperscript{88} – yet we know very little about what audiences do with history on television. Corner suggested that studies of how viewers encounter particular history documentaries could be ‘hugely productive’.\textsuperscript{89} Such research could help us understand how and why television histories

\textsuperscript{84} Bell and Gray.
\textsuperscript{85} Kerr.
\textsuperscript{88} Champion, 154.
appeal to audiences. Historians have an interest, a stake, in popular understandings of the past, yet as the considerable scholarship on public history, commemoration and popular histories demonstrates, historians do not control the ways that historical knowledge circulates, nor the ways that it is understood. We need to go beyond our frustration with this and try to discover the ways that television can enhance history and historical understanding, for, as Corner points out, ‘television has made significant achievements towards providing viewers with historical orientation and historical knowledge’. The question is, as Harlan puts it: ‘what can we learn from films that we cannot learn from books?’ Only through closer engagement with histories outside the written word can we hope to find useful answers to that question, but as history on television becomes more popular and more numerous, finding those answers is more urgent and important than ever.

About the author

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90 Corner, ‘Once upon a time’, 27.
91 Harlan, 187.