

The History Wars. Stuart Macintyre & Anna Clark
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WHAT DO HISTORIANS DO?

CHAPTER 2

In the course of this year, most Australians will watch a history program on television. Half of them will visit a museum or a historic site. A tiny minority will open a book written by a university-based historian. The academic profession contributes a narrow sliver of information about the past and the crime of which it is accused, rewriting Australian history, would seem to touch lightly on popular interests. Why, then, do John Howard and other opinion-formers wage the History Wars? Why do a scatter of errant academic historians command so much attention?

The reasons are partly to do with the territory under dispute in the History Wars and partly with the way they are conducted. The rewards for coming to terms with the past that Paul Keating offered in his Big Picture included greater tolerance, increased autonomy, a deeper understanding of the land and its original inhabitants, an outward-looking, productive and self-confident nation. The risks of a Black Armband view of Australian history that Geoffrey Blainey identified included intolerance of old Australia, loss of sovereignty, the

tying up of productive resources, disunity, pessimism and guilt. Both analyses of the options for Australia invested remarkable significance in the proper interpretation of its past.

Academic historians are prominent in such arguments because they are easy targets. There are not many of them, they are poorly organised, and they have very little political clout. Their academic activities are unfamiliar and their habit of writing for each other in a professional patois lends itself to ridicule and mockery. When they venture beyond the academy they can be blamed for creating the very problems whose complexities they try to explore. You can attack them with impunity.

For similar reasons academic historians are also an elusive target. They are scattered around the country in institutions that do not respond readily to administrative direction and in any case espouse the principle of academic freedom. The observation of that principle came later than is generally understood. Right up to the second half of the last century Australian universities forbade their staff from involvement in public controversy, and the appointment of Russel Ward to a history post at the University of New South Wales was blocked in 1956 because he had been a communist. Freedom of judgement and expression is nevertheless a hallmark of the academic vocation.

The mission of the university, it used to be said, was to pursue knowledge for its own sake and to follow the inquiry wherever it might lead. To this admirable credo might now be added: so long as you can recruit fee-paying students, attract research funding and satisfy an ethics committee. Even so, academic historians enjoy a greater measure of autonomy over what they do than historians working in most other settings.

Academic historians are prominent in the History Wars also because they speak with the authority of the expert. They have been trained in the discipline of history and appointed to university posts because of their expertise. Unaccustomed to media attention, they feel chagrin when interlopers command the headlines and are inclined to respond with professional

indignation. After Keith Windschuttle began his challenge to the practitioners of Aboriginal history, one of the less helpful replies was that he had no standing in the field.

Members of the historical profession sometimes regard John Howard's pronouncements on history in much the same way as the medical profession did those of Joh Bjelke-Petersen when the Queensland premier announced a quack cure for cancer. Few professions command the standing of the medical profession, but many Australians would not think that historians can be likened to doctors. A profession possesses esoteric skills, but who is impressed by arcane historiographical allusions? How often does the ABC television news present the findings of a historian with the uncritical admiration it uses for a report of some new cure for cancer?

A profession regulates entry to maintain a monopoly of practice, but the influence of academic historians over the production and consumption of history is probably weaker now than at any time in the past half-century. Australians do not regard history as a form of inaccessible knowledge, nor do they see it as the preserve of experts. These are healthy attitudes—history should not be enclosed, it should be kept as commons—but they leave the role of the history profession unclear. What is it that historians do?



In 2002 the Carlton Football Club announced a record financial deficit. Its autocratic president, John Elliott, finally yielded to criticism and his successor was left to deal with a legacy of debt as well as the penalties the AFL imposed for breach of its player payment rules. In the following year the club announced that it would change the name of the grandstand named after Elliott and introduce a ban on smoking he had resisted so strongly. 'We have ruled a line under the past', the new president insisted, 'and we are moving forward'.

Australians have ambivalent attitudes to history. The Carlton Football Club is proud of its record of sixteen VFL and AFL premierships. Portraits of former players decorate the walls of its social club, along with honour boards recording former officials. The navy-blue jumper worn since 1864, the club song dating back to the Boer War, the recent celebration of Carlton's 'team of the century', all affirm the importance of tradition. The new president, himself a former premiership player, is not ruling a line under that past; rather, he is excising a particular segment of the club's past that is no longer wanted.

History is often treated as dispensable; indeed, the term itself is often used as signifying something that is over and irrelevant. 'He's history' expresses dismissal of someone who no longer matters. This way of thinking about the past is a particular feature of modernity, where change is constant and habitual. With innovation comes obsolescence. Old industries decline, while new industries transform work, consumption and leisure. A country town first loses its rail service and silo. Then the bank closes, medical services disappear and the children are bussed to a school thirty kilometres down the highway. The church is turned into a tourist shop and the football club merges with an old rival in the next town. The farmers who remain are following Chicago commodity prices online in order to decide what crop to plant next. As the familiar landmarks disappear, impermanency becomes a permanent condition.

The English historian J. H. Plumb claimed more than thirty years ago that such radical dislocation was threatening to bring about the death of the past. He drew a contrast between pre-modern societies, where the past dictated what men and women should do: the weight of tradition was felt in myth and legend, in the sacred books and ceremonies that ensured each generation walked in the footsteps of its predecessor. That idea of an unbroken continuity yielded to the idea of secular time, and of history as a way of understanding change and

progress. History thus became a form of knowledge that broke the chains of the past, leaving just remnants of curiosity, nostalgia and sentimentality.

Plumb probably exaggerated the potency of his calling, and he certainly minimised the persistence of the past. The very distinction he drew between the two categories is often breached. There are appeals to history that invoke past events as if they were unproblematic facts that speak for themselves and talk to our innermost feelings. Such appeals strike a chord because they make us part of a compelling story. They tell us who we are, what we have done and what we might do. The words of the national anthem, 'In history's page, let every stage Advance Australia Fair', join us to a binding national past.

The word 'history' comes from the classical Greek word 'to know', with connotations of learning, wisdom and judgement. The writing of history, which goes back two and a half millennia to Herodotus and Thucydides, rests on a distinction between truth and myth. The Athenian's history of the Peloponnesian wars dealt with events that had actually occurred, and it ordered them by means of narrative into a coherent and instructive whole.

The Romans took over the form and used it to create a lineage for their city-state, to record its imperial triumphs and to show the inexorable effects of human passions. From Christianity it acquired a linear notion of time that gave the historical process its sacred purpose and linked all events to the central divine story. From the expansion of Europe, the challenge to Christian faith and the Enlightenment history acquired a sense of the differences between societies, secular progress and the capacity of history to comprehend the forces of change.

History was both an art and a science. It provided knowledge of the past and it employed that knowledge to teach lessons about human conduct. The antiquarian was primarily concerned to create a faithful record or memorial, and employed genealogies and similar devices to do so. The literary

historian used imagination and rhetoric to instruct the reader. The two branches came together in the great eighteenth-century histories of Hume and Gibbon, who offered insights into the rise and fall of civilisations that were endowed with the force of art and taught with the authority of the real.

History entered the academy in the nineteenth century as a science, alongside the natural sciences, that would yield objective knowledge of 'the past as it actually occurred'. The phrase 'the past as it actually occurred' was coined by Leopold von Ranke in reaction against the speculative history of Enlightenment radicals, and it was this German professor who codified the disciplinary procedures of a strictly accurate, archivally based scholarship. The records of the past were brought together and arranged in repositories, the historian interrogated the evidence and ascertained its meaning.

History, the academic discipline, formed around these procedures in the universities of Europe. It was a discipline defined by its commitment to the scientific paradigm of research, though that paradigm quickly transformed the teaching function as well. An influential textbook on the study of history, first published in France in 1898 with an English translation in the same year, insisted that it was not 'a summary of ascertained facts', or a speculative exercise in the philosophy of history, but an introduction to 'the method of the historical sciences'.

The authors explained that documents were the raw material, 'the traces which have been left by the thoughts and actions of men of former times'. History was not a science of direct observation and could not conduct laboratory experiments, but it obtained knowledge by chains of reasoning from the sources. The historian applied criticism to establish the provenance, authorship and transmission of the documents, and trained judgement to ascertain their meaning and veracity. Then came the synthesis as the historian determined the pattern of these 'isolated facts' and finally its exposition.

The 'scientific form of exposition' was the monograph, an exhaustive treatment of a particular subject, and the historical

profession devised research theses, scholarly books, journals and reviews to disseminate and evaluate its work. The same formats are used today. Then there were auxiliary publications such as calendars of sources, critical editions, handbooks, guides and general works for students; these too continue. The authors of the manual allowed the possibility of popular work for the public, but only on sufferance. 'A populariser is excused from original research.' Those who wrote such works 'abandon themselves . . . to their natural impulses, like the common run of men. They take sides, they censure, they extol; they colour, they embellish; they allow themselves to be influenced by personal, patriotic, moral, or metaphysical considerations.'



We see here the hallmarks of a profession: the claim of esoteric skills that give its possessors, if not a licensed monopoly, then an exclusive authority. It is difficult to know which claim is the more audacious: the assumption that the academic historian is protected by the procedures of the discipline against the natural impulses of humanity, or the belief that the historian's restricted forms of communication can prevail over popular history.

Even when this manual appeared, there were popularisers whose influence far surpassed that of the scientific school. We may think in Britain of J. R. Green, whose *Short History of the English People* (1874) outsold any of the academic histories, or we could go back to the historical novels of Walter Scott that shaped readers' sense of the past with a force that no scholarly article in the *English Historical Review* could approach.

Similar comparisons apply to Australian history. Russel Ward's codification of radical nationalism in *The Australian Legend* sold 40 000 copies in the twenty years after it appeared in 1958, and Geoffrey Blainey's *Tyranny of Distance* has remained constantly in print since it was published in 1966. But two autobiographical works of the 1980s, A. B. Facey's *A Fortunate*

Life and Sally Morgan's *My Place*, comfortably outsold both these outstanding examples of historical scholarship. When historians gather in professional conferences, their conversation soon turns not to sales figures but to the problem of finding a publisher.

Some 350 academics are retained to teach and conduct research in departments of history in Australian universities, and perhaps half of them work on Australian history. A shifting number of part-time and casual employees make up an auxiliary teaching force. There are more freelance historians who earn a living by writing commissioned histories of companies, government and local government bodies, and other organisations. 'Public history' is the name for this activity, adopted from the United States, and with its own professional association. There are more again who write local and family history as a labour of love. They too have their own societies; there are hundreds of local ones and the state peak bodies run up to a thousand members.

In the course of an academic year, possibly 10 000 undergraduates will attend classes in some aspect of Australian history, but the overwhelming majority of young Australians conclude their study of the subject at the end of Year 10 of secondary school. That experience might well be fragmentary, for reasons we shall explore in Chapter 9, and it might have only fleeting connection to the history that is produced in the universities.

Many will form a sense of this country's past by reading novels, since literature has created influential versions of Australian history from well before it was consolidated as an academic discipline. Marcus Clarke anticipated the Black Armband in a dark melodrama of a convict serving out *His Natural Life* (1874), and also wrote an early school history. Rolf Boldrewood established the bushranger legend in *Robbery under Arms* and Henry Handel Richardson set down the restlessness of the gold-rush generation and the ambivalences of the migrant experience. More recently, Jean Bedford, Robert

Drewe and Peter Carey have embellished the legend of Ned Kelly, which Sidney Nolan worked so memorably into visual imagery. Drama, verse and art were early and enduring mediums of history.

The first Australian feature-length film told *The Story of the Kelly Gang* in 1906, and the story has been refilmed several times. Clarke, Boldrewood and Richardson were all projected onto the screen, along with a range of films that took up epic events in Australian history, from *Eureka* and *Burke and Wills* to *Gallipoli*. The film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* has reached a wider audience than any of the participants in the History Wars.

Television quickly spawned historical drama series, concentrating initially on the colonial period but moving later into the *Bodyline* cricket crisis, *The Petrov Affair*, *The Dismissal* and *True Believers*. Soap operas such *The Sullivans* are characterised by carefully reconstructed period settings. Historical documentaries range from Peter Luck's newsreel compilation of *This Magnificent Century* to interpretive series such as those presented by Geoffrey Blainey, Robert Hughes and Paul Kelly.

Libraries, galleries and museums were powerful instruments of social memory that preceded the formation of the historical discipline in Australia, collecting, organising and presenting materials deemed worthy of remembrance. The urge to commemorate first raised statues and monuments for individual heroes, such as governors and explorers. Later, most notably in war memorials, it perpetuated the memory of collective heroes. Historical anniversaries, re-enactments and commemorations have become increasingly grand public spectacles: the sums expended by the Australian Bicentennial Authority and the Council for the Centenary of Federation dwarfed the combined budgets of the university history departments over the two decades in which they operated.

History has become a major component of the tourist industry, with centres such as Longreach's Stockmen's Hall of Fame and theme parks such as Ballarat's Sovereign Hill increasingly important to their towns' fortunes. The employment of

a historical consultant has become essential to the preparation of a regional authority's strategic plan, the heritage study a condition of permission to redevelop an urban precinct.



How does this proliferation of activity influence popular understandings of the past? A recent American study asked a representative sample of the population whether they had engaged in a history-related activity in the previous twelve months. The researchers found that 81 per cent of respondents had watched a movie or television program about the past, 57 per cent had visited a museum or historical site, 36 per cent worked on family history, and 20 per cent were part of a group studying or preserving the past. This last category encompassed a wide range of activities beyond historical education and research, and if those who pursued a hobby concerned with the past (say, railways) or collected items from the past (perhaps quilts) were added, then it took in two-fifths of the sample. The most popular activity, involving 90 per cent, was looking at photos with family or friends.

Participation in an activity was not always an accurate guide to engagement. The respondents felt most connected to the past when they discussed it with family and friends, or visited a museum or historic site; least connected when in a classroom, reading a book or watching a movie. Respondents also found their grandparents more reliable guides than college professors. 'History is too cold, too analytical', said one. Museums were felt to be more trustworthy because they let 'you come to your own conclusions'.

A striking finding was the small proportion of respondents for whom American history was most important, just 22 per cent. The demographic segment most interested in national history was men aged over 65; the interest fell away sharply among ethnic minorities and others who thought that the history of their own racial, religious or cultural group was most

important to them. Yet in discussions with the respondents the researchers discovered this separation was misleading. They found people making connections between personal and public events. A photo of a family member in uniform triggered references to the Second World War; a personal incident in the past would be dated by reference to the assassination of President Kennedy.

More recently, a research group at the University of Technology Sydney has undertaken a similar survey of Australian activities and attitudes. Here again, the most common activities are looking at photos and watching movies or television, with half the sample reporting visits to museums or historic sites and 32 per cent engaged in family history or a history-related hobby. Perhaps surprisingly, Australians are far more interested in their own national history than Americans, and this interest is particularly marked among women. Australian men display greater interest in world and European history, possibly because of their greater interest in war. Women, on the other hand, combine an interest in Australian, Indigenous and ethnic history with genealogy. The researchers suggested that women are the principal custodians of 'the intimate and domestic past'.

As with Americans, most Australians feel the closest connection to the past in family circles or museums and regard museums as the most trustworthy guides to the past, though Aboriginal respondents think them far less so. History teachers come well down the list of reliable sources of information. Academics fare much better, though the researchers warn that this might not be cause for self-congratulation: some of their respondents did not really know what academic historians do.



Nearly fifty years ago a fastidious professor of history at the University of Melbourne surveyed his field at a congress of

the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science. He found much to praise as he considered the improvement in the research and writing of Australian history. He rejoiced that the activity had become professional. While allowing that some excellent work was produced outside the academy (he particularly commended that of a young freelance business historian, Geoffrey Blainey), he was insistent: 'If it is "professional", however, its conventions, methods of presentation and standards of evidence are those set in universities'.

The academic history profession that this professor celebrated in 1959 was a recent phenomenon. Before the Second World War there were just five professors of history (with an associate professor in Western Australia) who, with a handful of assistants, conducted the discipline in the country's six small universities. They did not lack students, for history was an integral part of a liberal education, and they lectured and examined in a range of subjects that spanned ancient, European, British, imperial and colonial history.

They professed history as a discipline that yielded an objective account of the past, and some of them even found time to conduct research (usually in Australian history, since its records came readily to hand). Their abler graduates proceeded to further training at Oxford, Cambridge or London University, and some returned to appointments in Australian universities; but with so few positions, that depended upon a vacancy becoming available.

The Second World War convinced government of the national importance of greater expertise and knowledge. Demobilisation brought a dramatic increase in university enrolments, and post-war planning augmented provision further. Funds were provided to enable research, journals and academic presses were established to publish it, libraries were expanded to support it. The Australian universities offered scholarships to graduates wishing to pursue research and introduced the degree of Doctor of Philosophy as a professional credential. As new universities were created, they recruited from this pool.

History shared in this new bounty. In 1954 there were seven departments employing 60 historians; in 1960, ten departments and 150 historians; and by the early 1970s, sixteen departments and 320 full-time lecturing staff. When those in temporary appointments, cognate departments or the colleges of advanced education are included, the academic profession numbered 750. That was the ceiling. When the OPEC oil crisis hit in 1974, an era of sustained economic growth came to an end and the circumstances that had favoured higher education disappeared.

More than a decade later, when the expansion of higher education resumed, its emphases were very different. Under Education Minister John Dawkins the universities were directed to match their activity to the needs of the economy and the labour market, to provide vocational training and produce knowledge for the growth industries of the information economy. History fared poorly in the mergers and reorganisations that followed. When the heads of the country's history departments met in 1989, they reported 451 staff and a subsequent survey in 1995 found 410. The Howard government's funding policies have turned the screws further.

The rapid growth of the profession brought movement into new fields of history, allowed for innovation, fostered esteem and confidence. The subsequent contraction forced the abandonment of some fields, increased staff workloads (since student numbers held up) and made it more difficult to replace those who left. This left an ageing cohort: a survey of staffing in the quarter-century to 1995 found that more than half of all appointments had been made in the years 1970 to 1975. As the opportunities to join the academic profession declined, there was a movement into the new fields of applied history. First, history graduates turned to public history and the heritage industries, then history departments began to offer training and qualifications in these professions. They also began to teach the new forms of history with courses on memory and identity, visual history and film.

Other historians found employment in new university programs in gender studies, cultural studies, Australian, Asian or international studies, tourism, media and communications and the other fields that sprouted as faculties of humanities and social sciences sought to compete with the vocational attractions of professional faculties. Historians are a resilient species, their skills adaptable, and they take their chances where they find them. It is less clear that they are free to carry their discipline into these new activities. Growth areas attract competitors with their own methodologies. After they migrate, historians are under pressure to assimilate.

For all these strains, the discipline retains most of its essential features. History attracts large numbers of undergraduates, excites them with the allure of the past and introduces them to the procedures of historical interpretation. One of the first lessons it teaches is that they must form their own judgements based on their understanding of the subject, their reading of the evidence, their evaluation of the arguments, their capacity for empathy, engagement and lucidity. Students learn how to find the sources that are relevant to their inquiry, and the conventions of citation that ensure it is properly documented and open to inspection. History attracts similarly large cohorts of postgraduates, who apply these methods to the advanced study of a particular topic.

The members of the profession inform their teaching with research. They pursue research in archives and libraries, and this activity remains the primary characteristic of the academic discipline and vocation. It determines both promotion and reputation. Peer assessment, by examination of research theses, refereeing of books and articles, and appraisal of applications for research grants, enforces standards and shapes the topics that are studied. Like other professions, the history profession is also competitive, and the endeavour for originality tempers the tendency to imitation. The research imperative that began with Ranke's school of scientific history continues to drive innovation.

Australia spends heavily on such research. The Commonwealth government allocates hundreds of millions of dollars annually to the activity, and it allows Australian researchers to produce about 2 per cent of the world's research literature. The Australian Research Council is the principal agency that allocates research grants across the full range of academic disciplines and it is able to fund just one in four of the more than 3000 applications it receives each year. Historians might pick up twenty-five or thirty of those grants. Towards the end of the year, when the minister approves the council's recommendations and a press release goes out, there is a good chance that it will be a history project that attracts attention. The pattern was set some years ago when Labor was in office and an Opposition 'waste watch committee' seized on a grant to support a research project on family life in ancient Rome.

The choice is instructive. Few question the public funding of research since the creation of new knowledge is the main-spring of the information economy. Ridicule is never directed at projects in the biological or physical sciences. No-one queries the merits of a grant that allows economists to buy a data set from the Australian Bureau of Statistics in order to apply some econometric model in the American literature. But research in the humanities is both familiar and puzzling. It seems to labour over questions where the answer is obvious, and to couch the investigation in terms that provide philistines with an irresistible target.

John Howard's denunciation of the rewriting of Australian history draws on this suspicion. He appeals to a history that is given rather than made, and needs to be defended from those who would tamper with it. Commenting in 2000 on the anniversary of Gallipoli, the prime minister regretted the way that the 'issues' raised by historians distracted attention from a proper appreciation of 'exactly what happened'. In defending the national past from rewriting by revisionists, he upholds the facts against interpretation.

The appeal to history as a record of 'exactly what happened' attests to the force of Ranke's dictum: 'the past as it actually occurred'. But Ranke was the authority who insisted that this knowledge had to be retrieved and the scholar who laid down the procedures of historical research that would create it. History is a reconstruction of the past that seeks a particular kind of fidelity within which the facts acquire their authority. Of all its devices, the narrative is the most compelling for it creates a sequence of factual events and connects them with a dramatic momentum that carries the history forward from starting point to conclusion.

That is not how life is lived. Human life is a swirl of divergent impulses, failed beginnings and unexpected outcomes that are as surprising as humanity is rich and complex. Life is lived in the present without the benefit of a grand narrator. It is the historian who enjoys the advantage of hindsight to select particular events and arrange them into a coherent pattern. The facts do not exist prior to the interpretation that establishes their significance. Rather, historical research involves a continuous dialogue between the two.

The historian goes to the archives with hypotheses—without them it would be impossible to know what to look for—that are entangled with sympathies and expectations. But you never find precisely what you are looking for, or if you do it bodes ill for the project. The sharpest excitement comes when you open a file and are confronted by some unexpected evidence. That is when you revise the argument and reorient the inquiry. The interaction between what you are looking for and what you find is continuous. It carries over into the process of writing, which is the most taxing and the most rewarding aspect of historical discovery.

History is also a discipline. In academic parlance, a discipline refers to a branch of knowledge, but it also reminds practitioners of the rules that govern their activity. If historians create history, they are not free to invent or falsify it. The discipline

defines the standards historians are expected to observe. They include familiarity (the ability to situate the subject within a substantial body of relevant material), comparative judgement (the capacity to absorb and appraise different, sometimes conflicting sources), appreciation of authority (acknowledgement of earlier accounts and proper consideration of them), awareness of manifold truth (the ability to understand why those with different views are bound to know the past differently) and honesty (a fidelity to what is found).

These are the attributes that enable historians to contribute to the history that is practised outside the university and to shape the understanding of Australian history. Their adherence to such standards is one of the issues at stake in the History Wars.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT DO THEY SAY?



The first Australian histories were not histories of Australia. They were histories of British settlement in the antipodes. They were published in London as well as locally, and directed to British as well as Australian readers. William Charles Wentworth, John Dunmore Lang, Henry Melville, James Macarthur and John West wrote history as a medium of debate about the burning issues of the day, seeking to inform public opinion and persuade those in Whitehall who determined colonial policy.

Were the convicts a help or a hindrance? Did the governors abuse their authority? Had the rights of the Indigenous inhabitants been respected? Were the colonies ready for self-government? These questions were answered in narratives that related the course of events since settlement to demonstrate the pernicious effects of bad policy and the welcome results of good. They were polemical histories, as sharply political in content and purpose as any mentioned in the History Wars.

The advent of self-government in the 1850s did not end these tendencies. Colonial governments commissioned historians who boosted their achievements and prospects to