

## Number 3 THE PAST, THE OTHER, SELF, HISTORY and HISTORIES

Max Quanchi

History Division, University of the South Pacific

### 1.1 Introduction; the old and the new history

The discipline of History as it appears today in the form of subjects taught in university degrees is unrecognisable against the "History" taught twenty years ago. This rapid transformation is best reflected in the contents of the discipline's major journal in Australia, *Australian Historical Studies*. Once dominated by erstwhile, traditional, scholarly, footnoted articles and book reviews, in recent years *Australian Historical Studies* has added sections which analyse exhibitions, "historical celebrations", "historical sites", a "Reflections" section on the work of historians and a "Debate" forum in which historians argue the merits of previously published articles. This transformation to histories which are reflective, critical and self-interrogating, and away from objective narrative and a past which can be known is paralleled by a surge of interest in the public domain. National essay and book competitions, commemorations, historic homes and displays, history theme parks and historical drama, television documentaries, doco-drama and movies attempt to inform and entertain the public about what it was like in the old days. It is also paralleled in academia by a blurring of discipline lines as historical methodologies and approaches drift into or are captured by cultural and literary studies, law, the sciences and social sciences. Not only has (H)istory been redefined, but its underpinning ideological and theoretical structure and the nature of its scrutiny of the minutiae of past events has also been challenged.

### 1.2 Can we know the way it really was?

In 1998, a special issue of *Australian Historical Studies* was devoted to "The Fifties". It sought to "fill in the spaces between the broad brushstrokes of images circulating in contemporary discourse". The editors wanted to highlight the dynamic and disparate character which challenges the certainty experienced by those at the time, and the certainty with which historians, then and now, described the era. The essays in the special issue argued that our understanding of "The fifties" has been based on a false understanding of what really took place. This assertion reflects on a dynamic and competitive discipline - competing within its own ranks for a position on whether it is possible to know what really happened (the truth) or whether there are still undiscovered silences, multiple trajectories, contrary interpretations and a past only known through the prism of our present and personal lens.

### 1.3 The seductive authority of older narratives

The discipline of History in 2010 could best be described as a pastiche or bricolage – an assortment of ideas and methodologies blended into a single approach. Historians have absorbed new meanings, concepts and themes, global dichotomies, technologies and revisions, and by searching for new understandings of the past (and present) the discipline is absolutely not fixed in its content or methodologies. New sub-fields continue to emerge as historians engage with Gender, Indigenous Histories, Public History, Rural life, Postcolonial critiques, Environmentalism, Globalisation and related research concentrations in Diaspora, Memory, Photography and Consciousness, among others. This dynamism has spread across the academic History departments, into the public arena and into isolated corners of the school curricula where individual teachers are free to take on innovative topics and projects. This has led to all sorts of new histories being told - by academics, amateur historians, museum and gallery curators, television documentary makers, radio programmers and (Hollywood) film makers. Some reflect the old History - the detailed description of progress, order, normality, authority, great men and great events, cause and effect, enduring traditions, admiration for antiquity, chronology, narrative and comparison - but some Historians offer a sustained challenge to this view of the past. They assert instead a search to uncover the ruptures, abnormalities and disorder, the discontinuities, disjunctions and lost voices of the past, and in particular stress the idea that the way we see the past is related to the way we see the present.

The discipline of History has become a pastiche (of stories) and bricolage (of theories). Nietzsche's categories are still relevant;

- monumental history – the recording of progress, action and struggle
- antiquarian history – conserving relics and revering the past; and
- critical history – recording suffering and the desire for a better life

But they are now a little obscured because of the extensive borrowing that has taken place between disciplines in the humanities and social sciences (and others). This borrowing is so prevalent that some Historians see the boundaries as increasingly and dangerously blurred.

However, History has retained its central position and its disciplinary integrity because the other disciplines value and rely on the context that is uncovered around an event by the rigorous techniques of historical inquiry. History is central to all knowledge because it reveals contextual understanding of the surrounding era, ideologies, language and motivation. It also offers methods for deciphering the fragments of the past which remain. Because "the past and the other are two of humanity's main preoccupations", context, or in poststructuralist terms, the repertory of contiguous cultural representations which illuminate events in the past, is crucial to all assertions in all the contributing disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. The need for context will always give History a central place in knowledge. Furthermore, it is now accepted that the records or evidence of the past that we have with us today are imperfect and at best fragmentary. Because of these gaps, any interpretation of the past is constantly subject to revision. Rather than "The history of ....",

posing as an incontestable, truthful account of the past, what we have now are contested domains, contrasting views and a range of probable and improbable guesses. Jocelyn Linnekin has concluded that "as contending voices and points of view proliferate, history becomes not so much a text as an ongoing debate". Added to this uncertainty about what happened in the past is the acknowledgment, only recently, that the past is constructed (that it is written, danced, filmed, photographed, sung and drawn) in ways which are very personal. The present is very much a motivation for what we tell and the way we tell stories about the past.

Because of each historian's commitment to feminism, environmentalism, the vernacular, indigenous property rights, sovereignty and other causes, the present is the audience they aim at when they write and speak about the past. The older narrative History taught in universities in the ipost-World War II period, published by the major publishing houses and self-published by local and amateur historians is still evident and valued, but the discipline now includes a richer, diverse, deeper, critical and self-interrogating understanding of the past.

History is a discipline alert to the dichotomy between histories which are written and spoken; to issues of authorship - who owns a story and who has the right or the position to be the story-teller; to new skills suited to interpreting both old and new evidence, to new media and platforms for telling stories of the past; and to ways in which the past is used and abused in the public domain. Although the following discussion has the historiography of Australian historical writing as its focus, the theoretical and empirical changes it highlights also relate more broadly to the History taught around the world at senior level (Ancient, Medieval and Modern Histories) and to the community, local, state and national history being taught in primary and junior secondary schools.

#### **1.4 1770, 1788 and 1901 - History as remembering dates**

Magellan's crossing of the Pacific, the bombing of Pearl Harbour, the gaining of independence (for example in Fiji in 1970) and the so-called discovery of Australia by James Cook, the founding European settlement at Botany bay (Sydney) and the federation of the colonies to form a single united nation are typically important dates and students should know them and the context for which they are worth remembering. For historians the question is how much emphasis should we place on celebratory or commemorative histories - which tend to acknowledge great men, empires and expressions of power, order and authority? Or should History as a subject place emphasis on a critical informed reflection on past and present, confronting the present audience with previously hidden voices, expurgated evidence, events and ordinary lived experiences? Historians move back and forth, arguing the relative merits of these positions, but generally agree that "history" (as the past) is problematic and controversial?

Australian Historians today are busy challenging the conventional wisdom or truth about what really happened; were convict women really whores; why is the German settlement at Nundah missing from the histories of Brisbane; was the convict era really vicious and violent; how did urban charities attempt to ameliorate the impact of the 1890s depression; was patriotism the reason young farm boy rushed to fight in the Boer War and World War 1 ; did the urban working class really read the poetry of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson; was the Country Women's Association really an anti-communist political lobby group; did Prime Minister Gough Whitlam really abandon East Timor?

To analyse events from an informed, socially critical perspective - variously called subaltern history, history from below, social history or postcolonial history - is an approach which now sits comfortably in university History departments along side traditional narrative, comparative and regional histories. Historians continue to agree that dates are central to establishing change over time and establishing the element of difference between time periods and events. Historians also agree that evidence must be scrutinised for explicit and implied meaning and released from the bias, limits and constraints of its making and application. Reasoned judgement, articulate assertions supported by evidence, and the ability to make an informed challenge to versions of the past loosely thrown about in exhibitions, art, documentaries, films and oral story telling are still the mainstays of History as a discipline.

But, today there are no absolutes in the discipline of History, only relentless introspection, and an array of interpretations and revisions.

## **1.5 Passive Victims and Active Agents**

The amalgam and integration of borrowed approaches and methodologies which gives History its unique holistic character can be seen in recent debates over the terms "victim" and "agent". These terms are usually presented in opposition - especially in histories of European expansion, exploration, adventure, conquest and colonialism. One side of the debate suggests that indigenous peoples were swept aside, incapable of resisting tragic social and medical problems and or combating the arrival of western technologies and ideas. This view, (of History as a study of European expansion) was popularised by Alan Morehead's 1956 book, *The Fatal impact*. It is a version of the past still promoted in television travel shows, coffee table books and non-academic general histories. This is despite the deconstruction or unpacking - the revisited scrutiny of evidence and revised interpretations of earlier documents, journals, log books and art - which shows that many Euro-American visitors did not think or act in this way. Secondly, this tragic impact version is repeated despite evidence to the contrary that shows Indigenous language groups, land ownership, cultural practices and other aspects of indigenous way of life did not decline but were actively accommodating and manipulative. Rather than fatal impact, the evidence from the past demonstrates continuities in identities, customs and cultural practices, and the maintenance of the traditional, alongside western introduced ideas and technologies.

The second term, "agent", is usually phrased as active agent or agency. It refers to the way indigenous peoples possessed, borrowed and adapted the new technologies, ideas and institutions which spread across the globe in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Terms like resistance, accommodation, confrontation and rebellion have been used, but in the main the contact was characterised by a peaceful use of new ways to achieve old goals. The term "agency" has become popular, but postmodernist historians, in striving to put conquered, oppressed and colonial peoples at the centre of their own histories, particularly by depicting them as successful and influential characters in key events, have also faced the problem of under-estimating the tragedies which affected ordinary people's lives. Along with identifying agency, historians now strive for a description which also acknowledges the physical, emotional and psychological disasters which affected individuals, whole villages, communities and nations.

Historians acknowledge (and most accept) these new and perhaps unsettling definitions of what History is about. The question is - will primary and secondary schools also move away from colonial narratives of powerful, authority figures, masters and rulers and towards more localised celebratory story telling of their own descendants, family and community heroes; will they move from borrowed language to the vernacular, and from Eurocentric theories and models towards a respect for traditional knowledge and indigenous ways of recording and describing the past. This localising, indigenizing and purging of the curriculum is under way - but is less evident in new school textbooks and classroom materials. At the school level, students should have the chance to enjoy antiquarian, commemorative, celebratory and narrative history, but also the chance to develop skills of critical reflection, and the questioning of evidence and practical ways to challenge dominant paradigms and hegemonic discourses.

Those who teach History in colleges and universities now seek to confront, expose and contextualize the competing versions of the past. Should this paradigm reach down into schools? Students do not need to read the scholarly articles and books which continuously arrive on the shelves, but they can engage in the scrutiny of old and new evidence and the revision and holistic application which underpin contemporary competing versions of the past. Students, for example, can question what is presented to them under the guise of "history" or "the past". They can seek out local, family and non-material evidence which might support or refute versions of the past and they can present mini-histories, time lines, role plays, speeches, dramas, essays and historical maps and posters which offer to their peers and local communities, a personal and alternative view of their own past. By critically examining the past as it is presented in school textbooks, internet sites, film and video documentaries, they can move from uncritical acceptance of what is purported to have happened in the past, to a position in which they offer a reasoned, critically, socially aware and personal view of what might have happened. These skills will make them sensitive to the ways the past is interpreted, how it is invented, and abused in the present to legitimise those who seek and hold power.

## 1.6 Ideology, methodology and practice

The following diagram summarises the challenge being made by the new histories, but also suggests that Historians often sit at both ends, and right across the spectrum and that they often acknowledge that one, more or all approaches are valid.

TRADITIONAL HISTORY _____	THE NEW HISTORIES
EMPIRICAL (INDUCTIVE) _____	THEORETICAL (DEDUCTIVE)
TRUTH _____	FICTION, MYTH, ILLUSION
CELEBRATORY/COMMEMORATIVE _____	CRITICAL/REFLECTIVE
NARRATIVE _____	DISCOURSE
IMPERIAL/COLONIAL _____ _____	INDIGENOUS/LIFE CENTERED AHISTORICAL POSTSTRUCTURALIST
(is not conscious of the theory which underpins them)	(borrows models and theories from other disciplines)
VICTIMS _____	AGENCY
MYOPIC _____	MACRO/HOLISTIC/WORLD VIEW
LINEAR _____	SPATIAL
CHRONOLOGICAL _____	DISCURSIVE
MONOGRAPH _____	SURVEY
ARCHIVAL SOURCES _____	ORAL, SIGN, SYMBOL, IMAGE WRITTEN
EVIDENCE _____	TEXT(LANGUAGE) AS EVIDENCE OPEN TO
REVISION _____	DEMANDING REVISION (eg., post- colonial/ anti-colonial)
EUROPEAN LANGUAGES _____	VERNACULAR LANGUAGES DISCIPLINARY
_____	MULTIDISCIPLINARY

These are not necessarily in opposition. Nor are they concepts or ideas that students in schools should argue about or analyse at length in the classroom - but they should inform the teaching practice of professionals in history and social studies. Awareness of these debates about evidence, interpretation, audience and authorship should underpin the way teachers teach in the classroom.

## 1.7 What content ?

Obviously university History departments have passed beyond the approach which saw content presented as "facts", incontestable truths about the past to be remembered and tested. Shifting the paradigm also involved shifting the focus of research, publication, grants and teaching. Historians now seek to empathise with the fear, illnesses and deaths of bystanders caught in the turmoil of European invasion; the dissent, activism and conflict in communities caused by different views on religion, age, gender and ethnicity. This critical interest in the past is not restricted to academics - Stuart MacIntyre has noted "there is considerable evidence of a genuine and autonomous interest in the past, of a popular memory which exist independently of and often in opposition to the dominant memory".

On the cusp of the 21st century, History subjects that still focus primarily on the pre-1945 European world are being challenged by subjects that focus on contemporary patterns and themes. The new History subjects acknowledge that the world has changed more in the last quarter of the century than it has in the previous two hundred, and possibly, two thousand years.

The pages of History newsletter and journals suggest that both academics and history teachers are aware of the need for reflection and critical inquiry. There seems to be acknowledgment of Kerry Howe's assertion that "there are no absolutes in historical interpretation. History is what we choose to see and we tend to see what we are looking for. The past has no independent interpretation" and with the words of Greg Dening, that "the truth is that we are making history endlessly ... histories are texted pasts, not the past".

Knowledge of the past is a powerful tool in the present. Knowing your own and other's past is empowering. It invites action; it legitimises action and it creates active citizens. Historians, through their teaching, research and publication about the distant and recent past, now endeavour to pass on this knowledge and power. The question is - can a history lessons do the same for school students?

### References; Select readings on Historiography

Ashcroft B, Griffiths G and Tiffin H, eds, 1992, "Part X1; History" in *The post-colonial studies reader*, London, Routledge, pp.355-83

Blainey G, 1993, "Drawing up a balance sheet of our history" *Quadrant*, Vol 37, No 298, pp.10-15

- Bennett T, et.al. (eds), 1992, *Celebrating the nation; a critical study of Australia's bicentenary*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin
- Broome, Richard, 1994, "Aboriginal victims and voyagers; confronting frontier myths" *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol 42, pp.70-77
- Carter P, 1987, "Introduction; a cake of portable soup", (pp.xiii-xxv) in *Road to Botany Bay*, London, Faber and Faber
- Chappell D, 1995, "Active agency vs passive victimisation; decolonised historiography or problematic construct?", in Talu A and Quanchi M, eds, *Messy entanglements*, Brisbane, PHA
- Curthoys A, 1996, "Opening address; Thinking about History", *Australian Historical Association Bulletin*, No 83, pp.14-28
- Danaher G, Coombes P and Danaher PA, 1993, "Some implications of post- structuralism for studying and teaching history in Australian universities and schools", *Australian Historical Association Bulletin*, No 74, pp33-39
- Davison G, 1988, "The use and abuse of Australian history" in *Making the Bicentenary*, special edition of *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol 23/ No 91, pp.55-76
- Dening G, 1995, *The death of William Gooch; a history's anthropology*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press
- Denoon D, ed, 1997, *The Cambridge history of Pacific Islanders*, Cambridge, CUP
- Etherington N, 1996, "Presidential address; Trends and prospects", *Australian Historical Association Bulletin*, No 83, pp.29-42
- Farrell F, 1990, "Specialisation, fashions and change" (Chp 8, pp.155-86) in *Themes in Australian history; questions, issues and interpretation in an evolving historiography*, UNSW Press, Sydney
- Hamilton P, 1994, "The knife edge; debates about memory and history" in Darian-Smith K and Hamilton P, eds, *Memory and history in twentieth century Australia*, Melbourne OUP, pp.9-32
- Healy C, 1997, "Introduction" (pp.1-10) in *From the ruins of colonialism; history as social memory*, Melbourne, CUP
- Howe K, 1984, *Where the waves fall*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin
- Hudson W and Bolton G, eds, 1997, "Creating Australia" (Chp 1, pp.1-11) in *Creating Australia; changing Australian history*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney
- Janson S and Macintyre S, eds, 1988, *Making the bicentenary, a special issue of Australian Historical Studies*, Vol 23, No 91

- Linnekin J, 1997, "Contending approaches" in Denoon D, ed, *The Cambridge history of Pacific Islanders*, Cambridge, CUP
- Mcintyre S, 1996, "Discipline review; History", *Australian Historical Association Bulletin*, No 83, pp.1-13
- McIntyre S and Thomas J, eds, 1995, *The discovery of Australian history 1890-1939*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press
- McIntyre S, 1988, "The writing of Australian history" in Borchardt DH and Crittenden V, eds, *Australians; a guide to sources*, Sydney, Fairfax Syme Weldon pp.1-29
- Morehead A, 1956, *The Fatal impact*, Penguin
- Moses J, ed, 1979, *Historical disciplines and Culture in Australasia; an assessment*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press
- Osborne G and Mandle WF, eds, 1982, *New History; studying Australia today*, Perth, UWA Press
- Pascoe R, 1979, *The manufacture of Australian history*, Melbourne, OUP
- Potts D, 1991, "Two modes of writing history; the poverty of Ethnography and the potential of narrative", *Australian Historical Association Bulletin*, No 66-67, pp.5-24
- Reynolds H, 1994, "History" (Chp 1, pp.24-40) in Nile R, ed, *Australian civilization*, Melbourne, OUP
- Russell P and White R, 1994, eds, *Pastiche 1; Reflections on nineteenth century Australia*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin
- Russell P and White R, 1997, eds, *Pastiche 11; Memories and dreams; Reflections on twentieth century Australia*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin
- Ward JM, 1963, "Historiography" in McLeod AL, ed, *The pattern of Australian culture*, Melbourne,
- White R, 1981, *Inventing Australia; images and identity 1688-1980*. Sydney; Allen and Unwin
- Windshuttle K, 1996, "Paris labels and designer concepts" (Chp 1, pp.7-40) in *The killing of History*, Macleay, Sydney
- Young R, 1990, *White mythologies; writing History and the west*, London, Routledge