Reviews

Australian History Now
Edited by Anna Clark and Paul Ashton
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This collection of essays, compiled by Anna Clark and Paul Ashton, is an ambitious undertaking. The collection aims to elucidate this collection of essays, compiled by Anna Clark and Paul Ashton, is an ambitious undertaking. The collection aims to elucidate the practice, state and nature of contemporary Australian History by exploring its many histories, as told by some of the nation’s most eminent public and academic historians. The sheer diversity and scope of the subject matter under discussion is impressive. Australian History Now encompasses a range of topics, illuminating many divergent and contrary methodologies, critical perspectives, and narratives. The result is a rewarding array of histories which cast the discipline and its many incarnations in all manner of light and shade.

Paul Kiem’s chapter, ‘History Goes to School’ is of particular relevance to history teachers. Kiem, a former president of the History Teachers’ Association of Australia, identifies two fundamental changes that have occurred in the teaching of history since his days as a schoolboy: the teaching of a ‘more inclusive ... complicated and far less upbeat’ story of Australian settlement; and the development of the ‘inquiry-based’ method of learning, where teachers encourage students to learn through source-based analysis and to determine their own conclusions about the past. The significance of these changes is difficult to determine due to the hotly contested, parochial ‘history wars scripts’ that plague the curriculum design process. The futile discord between ‘inquiry-based zealots’ and their narrative history equivalents is also particularly detrimental. While Kiem is a self-pronounced supporter of narrative history, I believe he argues simply for a more balanced approach to teaching method – one that ensures a coherency of understanding. Kiem’s insights resonated with my personal experience as a relatively recent high school history student, whereby my history education was indeed fragmented, in part due to what I believe was an over-dependence on source-based analysis, and lack of overarching narrative.

Kiem’s reflections on the process of designing the new Australian history curriculum are insightful. He labels the process ‘ordinary,’ ‘an ad hoc affair,’ and in another article from Teaching History, claims it ‘was developed without reference to either pedagogy or assessment.’ Despite this dire assessment, Kiem goes on to determine that the success of the new curriculum is dependent upon the ‘expertise’ and ‘passion’ of the teachers entrusted to deliver it. He argues that genuine support and engagement from universities and bureaucratic bodies is required to achieve this.

Kiem’s essay is the most directly relevant to history teaching, however many of the other chapters in this collection are thought-provoking and will enlighten the reader interested in history. For example, Tony Birch retells his personal journey from academic historian to poet and fiction writer in his essay, ‘The Trouble with History.’ Birch details his loss of faith in the history profession. He questions the authority of academic history as the ‘legitimate’ form of the practice, having discovered alternate methods of ‘intellectual and creative engagement’ with history to be of equal worth. Birch gives an account of a lecture delivered by John Foster in which Foster recounts the story of a nineteenth-century father and husband through the interpretation of his diary entries. In doing so, Birch attests, he formed both an emotional and intellectual bond with the subject, joining the ‘narrative dots’ to tell a story. This beautifully crafted chapter demonstrates the power of history as storytelling. The close resemblance between novelist and historian, explored famously by R.G. Collingwood in his seminal work The Idea of History, is a constant that runs through many of the essays in this collection.

Concerning the authority of academic history, Martha Sear’s essay ‘History in Communities’ is an insightful meditation on the significance and legitimacy of oft-neglected community history. Sear points to the scale of community involvement with history and history-making in Australia, and the surprising lack of recognition this historical practice has attracted. She laments the ‘exclusionary and insensitive’ view of community museums as ‘antiquated,’ advocating for an interconnected view of history-making in which the various forms of the craft, become part of a greater and dynamic whole.

Also critical of the academy’s tendency for exclusion, Clare Wright in ‘Sex, Lies and History on TV’ encourages historians to engage more readily with...
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broadcast media – to ‘get in bed with the enemy’ for the sake of reaching wider audiences. She demonstrates that this form of ‘doing history’ can be both richly rewarding and historically legitimate.

Leigh Boucher addresses the ongoing relevance of the cultural and linguistic turns for the practise of history in his essay ‘New Cultural History and Australia’s Colonial Past.’ The history wars are at the heart of Boucher’s chapter. He describes how during that divisive period in Australian history, historical truth was used as a weapon against post-structuralist arguments for the contingency of meaning. Post-modern analyses fell upon deaf ears in what became essentially a public debate played out in the mainstream media. I recently studied the cultural and linguistic turns as a part of my undergraduate studies and, as a result, I have been forced to fundamentally re-evaluate my, albeit limited, understanding of historical authority, truth and certainty. I share Boucher’s assertion that to disregard postmodern questions of what constitutes historical truth and certainty, as a ‘fad’ or an unwelcome, disruptive practise, would now seemingly be impossible.

There are a host of chapters that address the continued impact of previously marginalised perspectives and ‘revisionist’ histories that emerged in the 1960s, including: chapters on feminism (‘A Feminist Voice’ by Ann Curthoys); labour history (‘Labour History and Radical Nationalism’ by Stuart Macintyre); Aboriginal history (‘Making Aboriginal History’ by Peter Read); and environmental history (‘Seeing the Forests and the Trees’ by Tom Griffiths). Clark’s own chapter – ‘The History Wars’ – is a welcome reflection on this most divisive and debilitating chapter in the local history of the profession. With measured delicacy, she examines the ongoing relevance of this period both in its impact upon the history profession, and the broader national narrative.

I cannot address every chapter within this collection, but there were two others that particularly resonated with me. In ‘My Heritage Trail,’ Graeme Davidson informed me of the history of heritage conservation in Melbourne – the first I have encountered. Davidson writes with much clarity and insight, drawing the lines between environmental and heritage conservation, and suggesting that our moral duty is to expand our thinking beyond the short-term of our lifetimes to ‘become good stewards of both our natural and human endowment.’

Likewise, Tom Griffiths in his essay, ‘Seeing the Forest and the Trees,’ advocates for a long and deep form of historical analysis – one that will allow us to place our fossil-fuel dependency in its historical context. Environmental history, he argues, bridges the science–humanities divide, and it is therefore ‘methodologically diverse and reflective.’ I see a union of science and the humanities as both welcome, and necessary to cut through some of the politicisation and bureaucratisation of environmental issues. Both Griffiths and Davidson reinforce my own belief that in this era of the Anthropocene, a view of history that places our human civilisation in perspective has a central role to play if we are to address collectively the ontological and environmental crisis of human-induced climate change.

This excellent collection showcases the evident talent and quality of Australian historians. I believe they do justice to the fascinating state, nature and practise of Australian history past and present. Personally, this collection has instilled in me – a young history student about to embark on an Honours year – with a quiet confidence in the state of Australian historiography. Every Arts student can attest to a feeling of uncertainty when choosing to forgo more ‘vocational’ pursuits for the sake of further study. But I am steeled in the knowledge that this collection has bestowed me: belief in the unquestionable quality, creativity, diversity, and intellectual freedom that the ongoing study and ‘doing’ of history has fostered – and that it will continue to do so.

Matilda Keynes, HTAV

Finding Hope

BIC WALKER, PAINTINGS BY ARTAN AND INDIGO

2012

Bic Walker was so moved when she heard about the life of Cambodian Srey Nith, she felt inspired and compelled to write her story. Walker introduces Srey as a happy four year old who loves to play and sing the songs her mother taught her. However, unlike a typical four year old Srey has to look after her sick mother, scavenging for food around the house. Srey looks after her mother when she goes to hospital, scavenging for food whenever and wherever possible.

The doctors at the hospital tried very hard to help Srey’s mum but they could not save her. When her mum died Srey lost