

# ○ HISTORY, IDENTITY AND POLITICS

## AUSTRALIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 2004

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It is with some trepidation that I deliver the Presidential Address at this conference with the timely but rather daunting theme of ‘Visions’. In thinking about possible approaches I initially turned to the first such address published in the *Australian Historical Association Bulletin*, delivered by the late Paul Bourke in 1994. He noted that the American Historical Association’s Presidential Addresses provided a model, describing them as ‘state of the union messages’ (Bourke 1994–95 p. 2). He further pointed to Presidential Addresses in the History section of Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science conferences, which were also ‘sometimes “state of the union” messages, sometimes examples of the research interests of the President, sometimes both.’ He thought that the range of possibilities should be preserved. I will do my best today to remain within his parameters. While I would prefer, as Bourke did ten years ago, to be listening rather than talking, I support the idea that AHA Presidents contribute such offerings to the biennial conferences. My title is ‘History, Identity and Politics’. I want under this deliberately broad heading to discuss some recent developments in History and then relate them to my current research. I briefly conclude with comments on the Australian Historical Association’s role. In keeping with the conference theme, my focus is on contested versions of the past in the present and historians in the wider community.

Before I embark on that discussion, I need to say again how honoured I was to be elected AHA President two years ago. I belong to other organisations but the AHA is of very special importance to me. Largely due to the efforts of a hard working executive and administrative officer, the AHA is, as I outline in my report to the Annual General Meeting, achieving worthwhile outcomes. Over the past year these have included a code of conduct, a most successful regional conference, the completion of a major curriculum report, the launching of a new journal, *History Australia*, a significant increase in membership and the offering of two new prizes.

I must also thank Nola Hawken for the welcome to country, Brian English for his introduction and Bob Carr for so generously finding time in his very hectic schedule to open the conference. I thank as well the University of Newcastle and the conference organisers for such a wonderful program of activities over the coming week. David Lemmings has, in particular, tirelessly and efficiently served as the AHA Executive member responsible for the conference. Some years ago there was a most successful AHA regional conference here in Newcastle. I am pleased that the Association is back. It is in many ways fitting that Newcastle, as a pre-eminent regional centre in Australia with a rich historical tradition, should host the first AHA biennial conference held outside a capital city.

Carly Millar and Mark Peel in their draft report on the recently completed AHA Curriculum Review of History in Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Fiji find that many teachers of History in universities are tailoring their subject offerings according to current trends and popularity. This has what might be regarded as the unfortunate consequence that staff members are often no longer teaching in their areas of primary expertise. Even so and while the general health of History varies considerably from institution to institution, most History programs

are confident that they preserve an acceptable range of offerings. Not surprisingly, a new thematic emphasis on imperial, colonial and post-colonial histories is popular and these are fields of strength among new staff. Subjects in world history are attractive to students. While the problems for History and other humanities disciplines in often unfriendly university funding arrangements ought not be downplayed, an encouraging message from the report is that the more popular areas of historical studies are often those that effectively assist students in making better sense of the world and the societies in which they live. The proportion of History students in many schools and universities may be less than it once was yet the types of histories that appeal to students frequently reflect popular historical interests in the wider community. The report in part concludes that 'History Programs of varying sizes have responded creatively to shifting patterns of staff expertise and student demand... They have developed and revised their curricula in ways that provide students with a context and a "toolkit" for understanding old and new issues of the present'.<sup>1</sup>

The so-called 'History Wars' in Australia continue to rage and I know that there are healthy differences of opinion about them among AHA members. I am not intending to discuss the wars in any detail but it is necessary to recognise that they point to the need for us all to take advantage of the public interest in our discipline and, in so doing, work for much better informed media coverage of and public comment on historians' findings and views. Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark observe in *The History Wars* that this is not easy (Macintyre et al. 2003 p. 12). Historians' natural habitat, they argue, 'is the seminar, the conference and the academic journal, where the rules of debate are understood and observed. They are less familiar with the media, unused to the polemical style it practices'. Yet, as Iain McCalman and Ann McGrath recently demonstrated in their edited collection of essays on the roles of historians and other humanists as expert witnesses in Australian court cases, this is changing (McCalman et al. 2003). Macintyre and Clark also show that History wars are not new, either in Australia or other parts of the world. Because the study of history so often deals with questions of identity and these are so frequently significant in political debate, it is not surprising that historians find themselves involved in public arguments about controversial topics.

You will, I suspect, remember something about the court case in Britain during 2000 in which the self-proclaimed but academically unqualified historian David Irving brought a libel suit against Penguin Books and Deborah Lipstadt, who had denounced Irving in print for denying the Holocaust. The court ruled against Irving but Richard J Evans, the eminent Cambridge historian who spent two years undertaking research for the defence, asked himself whether courts of law and other public arenas were appropriate places to debate history. The judgement branded Irving a racist, an anti-Semite and a strong supporter of neo-fascism. While conceding that Irving's keenness to sue Lipstadt might make other historians even more reluctant to question his professional integrity, Evans (2001) argues that the court was, in fact, a surprisingly good forum for illuminating significant historical issues.

Arguments like those concerned with the Holocaust may have been conducted in unfamiliar settings for some historians but Evans proved that such settings could be used to advantage. The arguments are, moreover, part of a much broader historiographical context, the ways in which the memory of a society or a state is created, disseminated, institutionalised and understood. It is not always chronological or factual history that is crucial here but, as American historian

Walker Connor (1994 p. 202) states, 'sentient or felt history...an intuitive conviction of the group's separate origin or evolution'. Some recent Australian publications analyse how individuals and communities think about the past and how their ideas are reflected politically. James Curran, for instance, in his *The Power of Speech: Australian Prime Ministers Defining the National Image*, points to national leaders since the Second World War grappling with ideas of Australia's identity and struggling to relate them to the nation's changing place in the world (Curran 2004). These men's frequent evocation of history in political debate, he maintains, 'has been no idle glance backwards; it has affected the way they have performed as leaders and given substance to how they have conceived Australia' (p. 1). Judith Brett's *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class From Alfred Deakin to John Howard* argues that political conflict is often over how 'particular events, situations, and institutions are represented and the larger frameworks of meaning in which these are located' (Brett 2003 p. x). The most effective analysis of such conflict involves the exploration of connections between historical memory, notions of identity and political processes.

My own interests as an historian of northern Australia reflect this situation. My most recent book (Carment 2001) explains that ideas about history in the Northern Territory during the late 1990s were interpreted as part of wider strategies concerned with education, museums, national parks and tourism. Emphasis is given throughout the book to attitudes, memories and imagination that endow the Territory's past with meaning. Some of this work, combined with my long-standing role in chronicling Northern Territory politics, led to my present project on the politics of identity in the Territory from 1978, the year of self-government. The long-term origins of the study, nevertheless, go back much further.

In 1998 I spoke at a ceremony outside Parliament House in Darwin to commemorate the 1918 'Darwin Rebellion', when angry unionists forced the departure of the Northern Territory's first Commonwealth Administrator. I explained the event in terms of the emergence of a strong local trade union movement and a clash of personalities between the Administrator and the main union leader. Chief Minister Shane Stone spoke next before unveiling a plaque. He thanked me for my remarks but said that my interpretation was wrong. For him the Darwin Rebellion was a most significant event in Territorians' struggle for statehood and needed to be primarily viewed in that context. He likened it, as did the plaque, to the Eureka uprising in Victoria.

In their indefatigable attempts to establish a local sense of identity, the Northern Territory's first Chief Minister, Paul Everingham, and all his Country Liberal Party (CLP) successors until the party lost office in 2001 emphasized the need to know about the Territory's past. They also strongly encouraged the view that Territory history was best understood as a struggle to establish a distinct frontier community. That struggle's result was a present characterised by excitement, progress and evolving social harmony. 'Territorians', a term widely used to include all those people who made the Territory their home, but which sometimes excluded Aborigines, were shown as pioneers and rugged individualists. Local car number plates proclaimed that the Territory was 'Outback Australia'. Deputy Chief Minister Mike Reed wrote in 1998 that in the past the Territory was regarded 'by many as Australia's last frontier. Today, the Territory is still regarded as different from contemporary mainstream Australia, being an exciting and dynamic "frontier" environment' (Reed 1998 p. v). Chief Minister Marshall Perron, who asserted in 1993 that Aboriginal culture was centuries behind European culture,<sup>2</sup> had no hesitation in saying a year later

that Darwin had been ‘a peaceful, multicultural city for more than 100 years’.<sup>3</sup> Commonwealth governments were frequently blamed for the Territory’s problems, with politicians and bureaucrats in Canberra criticised as out of touch with the Territory’s aspirations and needs. As Everingham saw it on Self Government Day in 1978, ‘we are cutting the apron strings that have tied us to Canberra’s control for almost 70 years. Territorians fed up with remote control and its mistakes have been crying out for years for this advance. Now we have come of age’.<sup>4</sup> Considerable importance was given to cultural and economic links between the Territory and nearby areas of East and Southeast Asia. ‘We have’, Perron once claimed, ‘been trading with Asia... since well before Captain Cook ever heard of the great south land...when we talk about building links with Asia we are mentally and geographically part of the region’.<sup>5</sup>

To his great credit, as part of what Ann McGrath (2004) describes as a ‘history awareness campaign... strategically pitched at promoting a sense of belonging’, Everingham created the Northern Territory History Awards to provide funding for historical research. He also supported a government History Unit. An expert History Awards Committee recommended projects to a Minister. The History Awards funded some important work, including *Far Country: A Short History of the Northern Territory* (Powell 1982) and *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country* (McGrath 1987). At its own expense the Northern Territory Government sent complimentary copies of *Far Country* to all members of the Commonwealth parliament.

However, alternative histories were sometimes in the Territory, as elsewhere, actively discouraged. After Everingham left Territory politics, there were occasions when Ministers overruled the History Awards Committee’s recommendations on the grounds that inappropriate research was being promoted. In one instance, this involved the rejection of a recommendation that a major project documenting the history of Darwin’s Bagot Aboriginal reserve receive a substantial grant.<sup>6</sup> The Government’s Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory gave emphasis to frontier life styles and industries, colourful and prominent individuals and ultimately successful battles to overcome hardship and adversity. There was, though, no exhibition with an emphasis on Aboriginal-European conflict (Carment 2002).

The situation so far described is very much a part of what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger present as the ‘invention of tradition’. Hobsbawm argues that “‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past’. Inventing traditions, he continues, ‘is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition’. Of particular significance is his claim that invented traditions are highly relevant to the idea of the ‘nation’ and its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols and national histories (Hobsbawm 1983 pp. 1, 4, 13).

As Stephen Alomes (1988) shows, nationalism in the form of the development of images and traditions has for over a century been an essential element of Australian life. It is expressed in sport, business, literature, music, politics and a variety of other spheres. Alomes demonstrates how in the early to mid 1980s Prime Minister Bob Hawke adopted a distinctively Australian style that promised for some a new sense of national direction. His government subsidised films such as *Gallipoli* and *The Man from Snowy River*, which were designed to encourage Australians’ pride in traditions of their national past. To mark the bicentenary of European settlement in

Australia, the 'celebration of a nation' took place on 26 January 1988. In Sydney the eleven ships of the First Fleet Re-enactment sailed into Farm Cove while in Canberra horses and riders completing the *Man from Snowy River rides again* trek paraded through the city's streets. Politicians were conspicuous. A Commonwealth government agency, the Australian Bicentennial Authority, funded and organised many events while the Prime Minister and state leaders gave speeches that often reflected on the nature of Australia's history and identity. Some Indigenous Australians, though, such as those who marched in protest in Sydney on the same day, expressed their contempt for the Bicentenary and all that was associated with it (Stell et al. 1989 pp. 12–17).

Maurice French observes that the 'general homogeneity of Australia's geography and peoples, and the low impact of sectionalism, and the metropolitanisation of the nation-continent have all tended to blur regional differentiation' (French 1998 p. 548). This is true but, as the publication of so many regional histories in Australia illustrates, enough differences exist between areas such as North Queensland, the Riverina and the Darling Downs to provide a focus for research that frequently reveals quite powerful notions of regional separateness. Like Americans, Australians often tend to see the frontier as a significant element in national development, frequently using names such as 'bush', 'outback' or 'never-never' to describe it. Graeme Davison suggests that the Australian frontier has always been both an idea and a place, signifying 'a line on the map and a geographically indeterminate boundary between the known and the unknown, the civilised and the rude, the safe and the dangerous, the ordered and the anarchic' (Davison 1998 p. 270). In large parts of remote Australia today there remain more Indigenous than non-Indigenous inhabitants. The country's biggest cities are mainly in the southern half of the continent and usually on or very near the coast. What Davison describes as the 'idea of the frontier' is well established in Australia.

Russel Ward contended in 1958 that the archetypal Australian was a bushman in the Outback (Ward 1977 pp. 1–2). Thomas Keneally wrote that 'the region which in the imaginations of most Australians is *outback par excellence* is the Northern Territory' (Keneally 1984). Mickey Dewar concludes that the Territory 'represents a frontier to Australians, a place where the behaviour of Territorians is in some way quintessential to the national experience' (Dewar 1996 p.15). The focus of many writers on the Territory, she observes, 'was an attempt to locate and define the non-Aboriginal occupation of Australia from all aspects' that sought to 'legitimise European settlement' (Dewar 1997 p. ix). Alan Powell goes even further. Non-Indigenous Northern Territory residents, he feels, see themselves as distinct in the Australian context because they still believe that they live on a frontier: they 'rather like the image', not just for the sake of tourist dollars, but because it causes them to stand out from the general mass of Australians.<sup>7</sup> Jon Stratton agrees. For him the Territory is the 'other', part of a discourse by which the rest of Australia defines itself as 'real' (Stratton 1989 p. 40).

Between 1978 and 2001 CLP governments of the Northern Territory enthusiastically created and promoted notions of identity for the purpose of establishing bonds of loyalty to the Territory among its non-Aboriginal population, most of whom came from other parts of Australia and the world. Governments championed what the political scientist Alistair Heatley (1981) described as 'Territorianism', an aggressively presented sense of identity that encompassed full statehood and rapid economic development. A significant element was strong opposition to Aboriginal land rights. Heatley maintained that 'Territorianism' emerged most clearly in the Territory gov-

ernment's dealings with the Commonwealth. Criticism of Canberra was 'traditional for Territory politicians' who 'made frequent, forceful (and, one suspects, telling) use of it in the new constitutional and political context'. Chief Minister Ian Tuxworth vividly illustrated this approach when he announced in September 1985 that his government would boycott the ceremony to be held at Uluru at which the Governor General handed over title documents to traditional Aboriginal owners. 'The handover', he complained, 'is symbolic of what is wrong about the relationship between the Territory and the Commonwealth'.<sup>8</sup>

The challenge facing the Territory government was how to establish and then maintain the Northern Territory's legitimacy as a separate cultural, economic and political entity. Because the Territory only achieved self-government in 1978, Everingham and his CLP colleagues were unable to make much use of already existing bonds of political obedience and loyalty. Their grand aim was a strengthened sense of Territory 'communion' and the effective articulation of those elements that to them held the Territory together. Many observers commented on the phenomenon. Thomas Keneally (1984 p. 68) observed that

The Territorians see themselves as a nation. Not even in Texas do you see a regional flag flown so fervently, and the Northern Territory flag, with its black, its ochre, its Southern Cross, its Sturt's Desert Rose, resembles more a national flag than does the Commonwealth of Australia itself with its hybrid of Union Jack and Southern Cross. At question time Everingham and his ministers refer to 'Southerners' – any other Australians apart from themselves – as if they were members of a separate federation.

Historians Bob Reece and Lenore Coltheart claimed that the Territory's government depicted itself as custodian of 'a long-awaited and hard-won legislative and administrative autonomy, whose course must be to fulfil the obligations their moment in history entailed. These obligations centred on the development of land resources now that distant government was discarded' (Reece et al. 1981 p. 12). Political scientist Peter Loveday (1991 p.7) pointed to the 'chauvinism' which was so evident in the Territory, 'directed against Canberra and other metropolitan centres, especially at election time' and asked whether the 'myth of the frontier' sustained it. Everingham's biographer, Frances Chan (1992 p. 59), explains how the Chief Minister immediately after self government in 1978 led the way through an astute public relations campaign involving giveaways such as flags, flag pins, coat of arms pins, emblems, ties, scarves and brochures. Like Keneally, she saw the new flag everywhere.

Some marked changes have occurred in the Northern Territory since the election of Clare Martin's Labor government in 2001. Yet in terms of the issues I have discussed today, there are many similarities between the present administration and its CLP predecessors. Martin and her colleagues remain strongly committed to the promotion of rapid economic growth and the achievement of statehood. A former postgraduate History student, the Chief Minister shares Paul Everingham's enthusiasm for the past and his recognition of its place in identity building. In a parliamentary debate on a government review of the *Heritage Conservation Act* during October 2003 she described how local history and heritage were 'very dear' to her heart and highlighted themes such as the struggle to overcome isolation, the push for economic development, the important role of the Chinese, and improvements in transport. She emphasised that she was

committed to promoting ‘a strong sense of history and community development’.<sup>9</sup> A well qualified and highly regarded historian, Mickey Dewar, is one of her senior advisors. On 25 June 2003 the Chief Minister launched an events grants scheme, a Territory Service Medal and a commemorative vehicle number plate to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of Territory self-government. Although the CLP was in power for most of those 25 years and they were for many Labor supporters a bleak period, Territory residents were asked to ‘celebrate’ the past and special community grants were provided to enable them to do so.<sup>10</sup>

I have probably said more than enough about my own interests to illustrate how history, identity and politics inter-relate in the part of Australia where I have lived for many years. While my examples are local, they are, I hope, relevant to the wider issues discussed earlier. Politicians and the media represent and sometimes misrepresent history and historians for their own ideological purposes. As James Curran (2004 pp. 250, 258, 211–212) suggests, Prime Minister John Howard’s attack on historians who, in his words, portray Australia’s past as ‘racist and bigoted’ echoes that of Geoffrey Blainey, although the latter used the slightly softer expression ‘black armband’. The attack illuminates Howard’s strong conviction that people should reflect on their history with pride and his defence of what he describes as ‘traditional Australia’. Paul Keating, on the other hand, Curran writes, in upholding the ‘radical nationalist’ version of the national past, believed that ‘Australian life was split between genuine Australian nationalists and disingenuous “Australian Britons”’. Keating, in his own words, credited ‘the Manning Clarks of the world – the historians who work on the big canvas’ as helping politicians such himself develop their visions. All this means that historians as diverse as Blainey, Clark and Keating’s speechwriter Don Watson have had a considerable degree of public influence and recognition. Whatever their areas of teaching, research and geographic foci, historians thinking about their public roles in Australia can very usefully study the values, experiences and responses of leaders who in a range of ways use references to the past in political discussions and processes.

Finally and briefly, what role, if any, does the AHA have here? Earlier today, at the Heads of History meeting, I said something about this in relation to Keith Windschuttle’s attacks on historians. While the AHA provides forums for debates about history, it does not normally take sides in those debates. Yet its new Code of Conduct also emphasises the need for fairness and honesty. The AHA can and should argue to the wider community that there is a crucial difference between what Richard J Evans (2001 p. 266) described as ‘real history and politically motivated propaganda’. The recent AHA conferences in Brisbane and Mildura showed that, contrary to some views, there is no dominant orthodoxy among historians in Australia. The contents of *History Australia*, the wide-ranging program for this conference and the latest round of successful Australian Research Council grant applications in History only reinforce that picture. To suggest, as Windschuttle did in his recent deconstruction of this conference’s program, that use of the words ‘gender’, ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Indigenous’ in a minority of paper titles or abstracts is a matter for concern<sup>11</sup> is particularly illogical.

The AHA cannot, though, afford to be complacent. Ill-informed criticism of History and historians in Australia continues from a variety of sources, including within the academy. Only two months ago Bob Catley, Professor of Business at the University of Newcastle and a former Labor Member of the Commonwealth parliament, used a *Quadrant* article to belligerently condemn what he called the ‘ossified and sclerotic humanities’ (Catley 2004 p.10). The article claims

that influential left wing academics in the humanities promote themselves and their research within the university sector at the same time that ‘the market is steadily diminishing their overall power base’. New entrants into History, he asserts, ‘have to pass the nomenklatura test as if in the Soviet Union’s academies’. ‘Those poor few’, he continues, ‘that entered before the test was so determinedly applied, or slipped past its gatekeepers or... later realised that the emperor had no clothes, have a difficult time in seeking advancement when denied preferment and research funds’. Although I am not part of the political Left, I have no personal experience or other knowledge of this test and Catley produces no evidence regarding it. But the fact that his generalisations were even published is further recent evidence of *Quadrant’s* continuing determination to maintain what Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark describe as its ‘close interest in the misdeeds of historians’ (Macintyre et al. 2003 p. 219).

There are also areas such as the need for better links between academic and public historians, the more effective promotion of History teaching at all levels and the need to come to terms with new and rapidly developing forms of communication, where much more effort is required. The AHA has failed to respond adequately to Don Garden’s 1999 plea that academic historians should establish and maintain much better links with the community history movement, as represented by something like 700 historical societies with nearly 40,000 members (Garden 1999 pp. 12–13).

Prime Minister Howard claimed late last year that, ‘As a nation we’re all over that sort of identity stuff’ (Curran 2004 p. 235), yet he very frequently indicates that he cares deeply about it. It was vital, he told Liberal students in 1996, ‘that all of you understand that winning back of ideas, that winning back of history is tremendously important’ (Curran 2004 p. 256). We ought not ignore such declarations. This conference, concerned as it is with historians’ visions, can make a significant contribution to understanding the use and misuse of history in influencing important notions of identity in Australia and elsewhere. If it does, there is cause for optimism about the discipline’s future.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Carly Miller & Mark Peel, ‘Australian Historical Association 2003–04 History Curriculum Review. Final Draft Report to the AHA Executive’, 2004, p 13.
- <sup>2</sup> *Australian*, 7 July 1993.
- <sup>3</sup> *Australian*, 15 April 1994.
- <sup>4</sup> Northern Territory News, 1 July 1978.
- <sup>5</sup> *Australian*, 15 April 1994.
- <sup>6</sup> Information from persons involved.
- <sup>7</sup> Alan Powell, *In Search of a True Territorian: Exploring Northern Territory Identity*. Nottingham: Centre for Asia-Pacific Studies, Nottingham Trent University; date unknown, p. 5.
- <sup>8</sup> Northern Territory News, 7 September 1985.
- <sup>9</sup> ‘Part 1 – Debates – Thursday 16 October 2003’, p 24, p.26 in <http://notes.nt.gov.au/lant/hansard/hansard9.nsf>.
- <sup>10</sup> Northern Territory News, 26 June 2003.
- <sup>11</sup> *Sun-Herald*, 20 June 2004.

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