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Age of Anxiety Reflections on the Present State of Australian History

Nicholas Brown

I. A 'self-referential' pursuit?

The final chapter in the recently published, two-volume *Cambridge History of Australia* is titled 'The History Anxiety', and was written by Mark McKenna, whose biography of Australia's perhaps most eminent – or at least identifiable – historian, Manning Clark, won the Prime Minister's Prize for Non-Fiction (and many other awards) in 2011. The chapter offers both a survey of the political trauma that has surrounded history as a discipline in Australia over recent years, but is itself a symptom of the problem underpinning that trauma. In concluding such a major collaborative project, McKenna's views have considerable authority in speaking for the historical profession in Australia. His perspective, reviewers have noted, is of a discipline 'less certain', 'multifarious, many-layered and open-ended', and grappling both with its own recent political entanglements, and with 'mighty changes' in all areas, from 'the research process' to its place in a wider culture of historical reflection.⁽¹⁾ In this, the dilemma McKenna discusses has particular Australian elements, but also connects to a wider contemporary questioning of the place of history in universities, nations and the media.

As a *survey*, McKenna's chapter deals with the search for legitimacy that has always been implicit in the settler-colonial history of Australia, and with the unsettled ways in which that history has been quarried for an elusive 'foundational narrative'.⁽²⁾ Whether in dealing with the dispossession of indigenous people, accounting for the enduring imprint and adaptation of essentially British state authority, or evoking a sense of identity to contain a sustained and largely unprecedented program of increasingly culturally-diverse immigration, history has had a particularly prominent role in articulating a sense of the Australian nation. The near celebrity status Manning Clark himself achieved in the 1970s and 1980s was evidence of this role, but also of the controversy it could generate. As Prime Minister (1991-96), Paul Keating echoed Clark's call for Australia's to end their 'groveling' and 'boot-licking' deference to the 'old world' and embrace the promise of the 'new'. History, in Australian political culture, has long been a

(1) *Australian, Weekend Review*, 23-24 November 2013, p.16.

(2) Mark McKenna, 'The History Anxiety' in Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre, eds., *The Cambridge History of Australia*, Vol.2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p.571.

primary site in which alternative interpretations, and justifications, of the nation are generated. Whether in labour, feminist, environmental or several other agenda of political reform, it is history in Australia which has been particularly prominent in framing the issues and informing the arguments.

As a *symptom*, McKenna's chapter reflects the corresponding role that history has itself been accorded, and internalized: a status as a kind of public conscience and affirmation, of needing to reach out to 'the people'. The anxiety McKenna identified was not just a matter of the debates into which historical perspectives have been drawn, but of the intersection between disciplinary practice – what makes for good history? – and its public role or calling. Part of history's anxiety, as McKenna sees it, arises from the extent to which a turn to more critical, politically and theoretically informed scholarship from the 1960s onwards had the effect of distancing historians from a general readership, of locking them into 'a myriad of specialist pursuits, each with its own self-referential terminology'.⁽³⁾ It is worth reflecting on this positioning, not peculiar to Australia but pronounced within its culture. No other specific field or academic discipline, certainly no other defined area of humanities or social science practice, has so defined its educational or research profile in such terms. No other field has been so valorized in a Prime Minister's prize for stepping beyond such 'pursuits' to reach the nation (in 2012 a more specific category of 'Australian History' was added to the list of such awards). And no other discipline is as prone to an 'anxiety' arising from a sense of failure to achieve that untroubled, uncritical public acceptance.

As both a survey and a symptom, then, McKenna's chapter is a good place to begin reflections on the current state of Australian history, particularly in the context of three inter-related themes. First, the 'history wars' waged in Australia from the late 1990s over the ideological content prevailing in the history taught in schools and universities, presented in museums and informing social commentary. Second, the objectives of a 'national curriculum' which might strike a better balance, in terms of content but also (and equally importantly) in correcting for a form of 'democratic deficit' identified among Australian citizens regarding their understanding of their society and its institutions. And, third, an historical scholarship seeking to adapt to these and other pressures associated with the ways in which history was being 'used' in contemporary Australia. Again, these elements have distinctive Australian dimensions, but they are not peculiar to Australia. Whether in the role of a textbook culture, the thresholds set in examination systems, the commodification of history in a range of media and institutional networks, the disenfranchisement of a generation who do not connect with historical identities or choices, or who connect with them in terms that fall outside the discipline's comfort zones—history is in trouble, needing not so much a defence as a make-over.

This paper cannot cover all issues arising in these areas. Already, in the discussion arising from the forum, reproduced in this journal, there are a range of alternative perspectives, most

(3) McKenna, 'History Anxiety', p.573.

particularly Professor Fujikawa's contention that the dynamic of public history – inclusive, representative, empowering – has most to offer in this make-over. Professors Fujikawa and McKenna both share a concern about the ways in which history has been corrupted by its academic practitioners. My focus here is on two, rather different complementary questions:

1. What is it about contemporary Australia that has produced these debates over the role of history?
2. What do these debates suggest about the questions being asked of history as a discipline, and in education, that might warrant more general reflection?

In posing these questions, my central argument is that Australia's 'history anxiety' is both a product of political circumstances exerting pressures on (and creating opportunities for) the discipline, *and* a condition generated by historians' perception of their public role. A wider, including a Japanese perspective, on this argument, would be valuable in (again) at least two ways:

1. In identifying areas in which Australian history has a new or continuing interest or significance beyond these preoccupations with its public role within Australia.
2. In identifying those aspects of 'anxiety' in historical practice that are not particular to Australia, but might benefit from being seen in broader intellectual, academic, cultural or political frameworks.

Some aspects of these frameworks can be seen in one of the central policy documents to emerge for Australia over recent years. The Gillard Government's 2002 White Paper, *Australia in the Asian Century*, was built on the imperative of a more comprehensive engagement with the Asian region, not only in trade and services, but in cultural exchange and underlying values. The incoming Abbott government might already have archived the report from its official website as merely a 'useful reference', but its underlying emphasis on 'soft power' continues to characterize policy paradigms.⁽⁴⁾ Not for the first time, Asian engagement sets some of the central terms in which aspects of Australian identity are being articulated.

II. The History Wars

There are several readily identifiable flash-points in accounting for the outbreak of the 'History Wars' in Australia.⁽⁵⁾ One was a speech made by John Howard, leader of the Liberal Party, in

(4) 'Asian Century Plans Consigned to History', *Australian*, 28 October 2013.

(5) By 'History Wars' I mean the intense public debate, not confined to Australia, over the political uses made of historical interpretations, and the perception that distinct political interests were being advanced through the public, educational and research engagement of historians with current social issues.

his successful campaign to win national government from Keating's Labor Party in 1996. 'One of the more insidious developments of Australian political life', Howard argued, 'has been the attempt to rewrite Australian history in the service of a partisan political debate'.

Howard's immediate target was the extent to which Keating was seen to have gone too far in suggesting – or demanding – that Australians rethink traditional views of their nation and its identity. Keating had urged Australians to embrace a wide-ranging agenda for reform in which historically-informed ideas of identity, allegiance and protection needed to be replaced. As his speech writer – himself an historian – Don Watson, explains, 'Keating believed that the last symbols of Australia's colonial past were inimical to a clear-eyed appreciation of reality'. That reality, towards the end of the twentieth century, included the need to deregulate industry and labour, embrace global competition in trade, seek points of intersection with the social, political and economic transformation of Asia, acknowledge the enduring impacts of colonization on Aboriginal peoples, move to republican government, and much else.⁽⁶⁾ Keating spoke in terms of changing Australia's present 'narrative', and grasped that to do so required changing perceptions of the past as well as those of the present and the future. Howard – aware of widely-felt discomfort at the pace of such reform, of the extent to which Keating was seen to be 'dictatorial' in pushing the pace of change, and being himself a master of 'values'-based populism – seized on this anxiety. He anchored it powerfully in the contrast between a nation being told it should be ashamed of its past ('the black arm band view' or 'guilt industry' were phrases coined by influential conservative historian, Geoffrey Blainey, to describe this interpretation) and one encouraged to take pride in its achievements, and appreciate the strength drawn from a shared heritage amid uncertainty.

Such a contrast in styles of leadership, and in framing agendas, was only effective as a political gambit if history already had considerable, and recognized, status in articulating understandings of the nation. History, clearly, was worth fighting over. Again, it is difficult to imagine such a debate being waged in any other area of humanities and social science enquiry, and in which the framework of debate was not so much empirical fact (although this was drawn into contention), but the interpretation to be put upon it. Equally, it was not a contrast essentially about history at all. It was about politics, and the search for political legitimacy.

It is important to note that the 'history wars' did not erupt into a previously placid world: the Keating-Howard contrast had deep, almost tribal roots in Australian culture: Irish Catholic-British Protestant; republican-monarchist – and so on. Nor can it be reduced to the struggle of political leadership. The connection between ideas of nation and the practice of history are familiar enough, both as a general proposition (such as the interdependence between models of fact-centred, progress-focussed 'scientific history' and modern state formation) and as a series of variations on a theme. It was remarkable – or not so remarkable – how quickly this debate descended into issues of professional integrity among historians which, as we will see,

(6) Don Watson, *Reflections of a Bleeding Heart*, North Sydney: Vintage, 2011, p.123.

considerably narrowed its terms. Stefan Berger has observed that nations dealing with a range of literate or non-literate traditions and memories, dominant racial and religious cultures, or contested constitutional claims arising from colonial legacies, tend to develop national historical narratives and associated historical techniques to suit their purposes – and the process becomes mutually reinforcing.⁽⁷⁾ The international phenomenon of late twentieth century history wars needs to be seen from the perspective of these national variations, and Australia is no exception to it.⁽⁸⁾ What was being transacted through the history wars was in part an industrial dispute over what defined the criteria of valid intellectual work – a question which extended not simply to an assessment of the eminent historians engaged in the conflict, but implicitly to the quality of the educational and imaginative experience they could offer to others. It is regrettable that this second aspect figured so scantily in the Australian discussion – but refreshing that it emerged so centrally in discussions at the Osaka forum.

And from this perspective, it is significant that Australia was characterized by a relatively short, largely nineteenth century period during which a ‘glorifying’ narrative of the nation prevailed before it was challenged by more critically-attuned historiographies of labour, party-political competition, racial destiny and social experimentation. What McKenna, retrospectively, sees as an insularity arising from a turn to political theory among ‘new left’ historians, can equally be seen as a continuity with that earlier historiography, developing through the inter-war years not as a coherent program among professional historians so much as field of new questions about the Australian ‘social laboratory’ posed with reference to historical themes. The questioning of power structures and institutions, of the limits of citizenship and welfare policy, among younger Australian historians of the 1970s onwards, had – even if characterised by a good deal of ideological and generational sparring, and professionalisation within a rapidly expanding university system – a sense of that inheritance, and its value: history as a radical – literally - discipline.⁽⁹⁾ A changing of the guard occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, then again sometime after the 1960s, but with – arguably – a relatively smooth transition into courses, textbooks, readings lists, public debate, and institutional consolidation. What, then, was so different about the ‘history wars’ of the 1990s? And why do theoretically informed perspectives become such a source of anxiety in the 2000s?

First, there is the political context already sketched: the intersection of ‘values’ politics and what Australian social commentators have also termed ‘the big angst’ of redefinition in social roles, economic expectations and political allegiance among ‘ordinary’ Australians from the 1980s onwards. This ‘angst’ translated down to the most personal levels of insecurity, in work, relationships, roles and identity – and has been perpetuated in a confessional media culture

(7) Stefan Berger, Introduction in Berger, ed., *Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

(8) See Tony Taylor and Robert Guyver, eds., *History Wars and the Classroom*, Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing, 2012.

(9) Mark Hearn, ‘Writing the Nation in Australia’ in Berger, ed., *Writing the Nation*, pp.104, 115.

(and a system of diminishing welfare security) that translates into the same terms.⁽¹⁰⁾ That history was drawn into this angst was a product of the ways in which Australians experienced, and were encouraged to experience, this next iteration in their ‘social laboratory’, as the certainties of the past gave way to challenges of the future. A quick example: in 1988, amid a politically charged debate over the extent to which Australia’s immigration intake was being ‘Asianised’, the Hawke Labor government commissioned a Committee to Advise on Australia’s Immigration Policies. Carefully setting aside multiculturalism as a policy objective, the committee’s report offered as a core formulation that Australia was defined by an ‘innocence’ to be contrasted to the countries many immigrants left, and should leave behind in thought and deed. That ‘innocence’ was contrasted to countries which had ‘social systems . . . we would find unacceptable and, in some cases, repugnant’. This was a striking, and early, characterization of an essential polarity between a pure Australian historical inheritance (the ‘we’), and the ‘repugnant’ tangle of histories elsewhere. It would prove a resilient formulation. Part of the power of the debate over history was that it translated so directly into personalized, simplified states – ‘innocence’ – that bore very little relation to the more complex commonalities of class, race, gender, region etc in which the new social history, from the 1960s onwards, had begun to encourage people to reflect on their sense of themselves.

Second, there is the local impact of that phenomenon identified by Jay Winter: the turn through the twentieth century to the ‘cult of memory’ – the processes by which people, especially in relatively affluent Western societies began to stake claims over, or to consume, history in similarly more personalized acts of investment, identification or ‘belonging’.⁽¹¹⁾ This is exactly what Professor Fujikawa reflects on as the commodification of history. John Howard’s appropriation of Australia’s ANZAC legend, and the boosting of visitations at the site of the 1915 landing of Australian troops at Gallipoli, are a striking illustration of this trend – and perhaps of the extent to which Australians, perennially concerned by their distance from the centres of ‘real’, European or ‘big’ history, were vulnerable to such patterns of consumption. In a society so preoccupied by history as ‘proving’ the nation, as confirmed the past ‘we’ share rather than ‘they’ bequeathed, ‘ego-history’ – history as direct ‘heritage and accessible ‘memory’ – has deeply shaped historical culture.

Third is a broader concern about citizenship, a product of the earlier 1990s, which saw a Labor-government appointed ‘Civic Experts Group’ assemble ‘disturbing evidence’ of the extent to which ‘many Australians lack the knowledge and confidence to exercise their civic role’.⁽¹²⁾ The challenge of overcoming this apparent lack of capacity to engage with community and political life was, revealingly, to be addressed primarily through an historically-informed

(10) Hugh Mackay, *Reinventing Australia: The Mind and Mood of Australia in the 1990s*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1993, p.6.

(11) Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, p.38.

(12) Civics Expert Group, *Whereas the People . . . : Civics and Citizenship Education*, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994, p.3.

regime of information, facts and tests that would better anchor citizens in their society. Rather than focus – as civics education in Australia once had – on building *relationships* at local levels, and with reference to local factors (the family, the school, the community, etc), civics became a matter of a more abstract, generalized literacy: what did citizens need to know to become reliable members of society? This focus evolved, perhaps ironically given the Experts Group's concerns with critical citizenship, to the questions on historical general knowledge that were posed in the Australian Citizenship Test, introduced by the Howard government in 2006 and readily characterized as being pre-occupied with concepts of heritage rather than rights.⁽¹³⁾ Among other civic programs introduced by the Howard government was one requiring the daily flying of an Australian flag.

Without dismissing the specific, and often bitter, destructive politics with which the History Wars were fought in Australia, it is worth noting these influences on, and preconditions to, the battle. There was nothing new to contesting ideas of the nation through history in the 1990s. What was new were the ways in which history as a discipline, a form of knowledge and identity, was made central to these highly personalized performances of citizenship, these places of 'anxiety'. Equally significant is the extent to which historians were, if not complicit in, at least drawn in to, a parallel line of defence. Entering into the campaign against them – that, as Howard put it, historians had allowed their desire to advocate for 'issues' to push aside their first obligation to convey 'exactly what happened' – historians mostly adopted positions relating to the empirical verifiability of their interpretations. They insisted that their accounts were based on careful, reflective readings of the evidence, if not always strict reliance on hard facts, on the framing of hypotheses and new questions, and the exercise of considered empathy in drawing conclusions. But as Tony Birch has argued, such a 'preoccupation with the integrity and authority of the discipline' might be judged a 'tactical failure' when the real issues at stake were about the use of history in defining precisely these new areas of personalised politics.⁽¹⁴⁾

Why did historians opt for this defence? In part, it was a symptom of that anxiety identified by McKenna: that the relevance of the discipline – even in educational contexts – resided essentially in a capacity to maintain an uncomplicated, unmediated connection to the people. But what other discipline – geography? literature? mathematics? sociology? – would so unquestioning place this responsibility on itself without first being clear about the specific contexts in which that responsibility was to be exercised: in classrooms, in lecture theatres, in public debate, in curatorial advice, in scholarship, etc? A central question to be asked in any campaign is: why choose to defend that particular patch of ground? The absence of a defence of the *educational*, let alone the scholarly (in contrast to the public) role of history in

(13) One sample question in this test reads: 'What do we remember on Anzac Day? a) the landing of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove; b) the arrival of free settlers from Great Britain; c) the landing of the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps at Gallipoli, Turkey'.

(14) Tony Birch, 'The Trouble With History' in Paul Ashton and Alison Clark, eds., *Australian History Now*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2013, p.239.

Australia's history wars is striking. To adopt such a defence would not be to simply retreat into 'the academy', but to reflect on what it means to encourage practices of historical thinking.

In a collection of essays published earlier this month, *Australian History Now*, several authors offer a different perspective on these questions. As editors, Anna Clark and Paul Aston concur with McKenna that Australian history is now characterized by 'unresolved, anxious public debates'. They are, however, more prepared than McKenna to allow that the 'democratisation of the discipline' has been at the cost of developing the capacity for sustained questioning that was at the core of the theoretically-driven infusions – 'the critical cultural practices of poststructuralism and postmodernism' – from the 1970s onwards.⁽¹⁵⁾ At least, these influences made politics, and a questioning of the basis and use of knowledge, central to historical thinking. And if they highlighted the contingent in historical interpretation, they also made the concepts of the 'collective', the 'social', even 'the nation' itself, matters to be interrogated rather than assumed. As Alan Atkinson argues in the same collection, 'history writing has become less concerned with [the] questions of possession and emotional attachment' to the past that were interrogated from such perspectives, and 'more with using the past as a field for imagination and entertainment' on the premise that it should be readily accessible, easily shared and consumed.⁽¹⁶⁾ I always return to the formulation offered by the American educationalist, Sam Wineberg, who argues that the excitement of historical study for students is not so much to confirm the familiar, as if the past was readily accessible, but to explore the unfamiliar, in an engagement with the past that is an inherently 'unnatural act'.⁽¹⁷⁾

There is no doubt that the ferocity of the History Wars forced many into entrenched positions. The Howard government came into office with a clear intention to narrow the compass of political debate from the 'big picture' to a 'small target' of areas in which it could drive a 'wedge' into discussion and highlight political differences. It was supported by a range of think-tank and media outlets which exerted considerable influence. It was equally clear that Howard's victory galvanized those opposed to his positions to think in terms of a major battle for causes which seemed under concerted assault – most prominently Indigenous recognition and reconciliation, minority social rights, redistributive social policy and tolerance of cultural diversity. The leading critic of the Howard 'white-wash', Stuart Macintyre, conceded that the style of one of his major interventions into the debate was deliberately 'adversarial', with the intention of stimulating debate (and also impact for his publisher).⁽¹⁸⁾ But the stakes were undeniably high: in questions of influence over government research funding, in shaping the terms of public awareness, in reputations. Perhaps the major, and certainly the most symbolic, of the casualties was the National Museum of Australia, which had the misfortune to open in

(15) Paul Ashton and Alison Clark, Introduction, in Ashton and Clark, eds., *Australian History Now*, pp.14, 19, 20, 21.

(16) Alan Atkinson, 'History in the Academy' in Ashton and Clark, eds., *Australian History Now*, p.116.

(17) Sam Wineberg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, pp.3-24.

(18) Tony Taylor, 'Under Siege from Right and Left' in Taylor and Guyver, eds., *History Wars*, p.26.

Canberra, after a long, sometimes controversial gestation, in a defiantly postmodern building in 2001, at the height of the conflict.

Conceived in 1975 as a social history museum which would address the natural and human history of the continent, and 'mend intellectual rifts' relating to Aboriginal Australians and the impacts of settlement, the NMA built its first exhibitions around a reflective, sometimes openly deconstructionist engagement with the themes of 'Land, Nation and People'.⁽¹⁹⁾ The Howard government was unimpressed with exhibits that aimed to historicize rather than celebrate central images in Australian history, such as 'the Digger': the iconic soldier figure of World War One. It commissioned a review to ascertain 'whether the Government's vision in approving funding for [its] development ... had been realised', and scoured deep into captions, selections, curatorial style and intent. The NMA was chastened in enduring ways for 'ridiculing' national myths, and made a caution to other national cultural institutions.⁽²⁰⁾ It is significant that it would in time rebadge its mission as 'Where Our Stories Live', in an attempt to assure visitors that they would not be challenged so much as included, and affirmed, in its galleries. This shift is one enduring understated but profound consequence of the History Wars.

III. The National Curriculum

Inevitably, the next campaign in the History Wars was in the classroom. In 2006 Howard announced the commencement of a school curriculum consultation and design process that would correct for a 'postmodern culture of relativism, where any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated'.⁽²¹⁾ A series of discussions, including not always representative groups of academic historians, education specialists and secondary level teachers, agreed on framing a discrete syllabus for Australian history, to be introduced across the nation, and framed around a 'questions and milestones' model that would introduce students to over-riding themes and key events. At this stage, Australia had no equivalent of a textbook culture in teaching history, or of a public examinations system which fundamentally determined students' future chances. What should be included in such a prescriptive curriculum model became the vital question. But context as well as content provided a crucial element in this exercise.

Pedagogy – how to teach, and with what objectives – is inseparable from what to teach in these discussions, and must remain so in all reflections on the History Wars and their equivalents. What kind of future citizen, or capacities for citizenship, should a compulsory course in Australian history, proposed for Years 3-10, (8-9 years old to 15-16 years old), seek to foster? The question was framed by a widespread perception of serious weaknesses in the then prevailing model of including history, along with geography and economics, within variations

(19) P.H. Pigott et al, *Museums in Australia 1975*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1975, pp.70-81.

(20) Mathew Trinca, 'History in Museums' in Ashton and Clark, eds., *Australian History Now*, p.138.

(21) Quoted in Taylor, 'Under Siege from Right and Left', p.35.

of a Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) model in most Australian schools. Premised on (in the Queensland example) helping ‘students understand how particular social, cultural, economic and environmental events from throughout history define peoples’ life experiences’, SOSE was seen to lack inherent intellectual challenge, methods, or skills development. Its origins, in a more progressive, inclusive, reflective and experiential approach to education from the late 1980s, seemed out of alignment with a pace of social change and skill development simply too rapid to be comprehended at such self-generated inquiry- and problem-based levels. It was also seen to have generated a cycle in which specific disciplinary training and expertise in teachers was undervalued; teachers with no such training were allocated to SOSE classes on the basis that ‘anyone can understand history’ as general knowledge; and students saw the deficit and judged the area accordingly. The status of, respect accorded to, and standards prevailing in, history in schools was seen to have steadily declined as a result. In South Australia between 1993 and 1998, the number of final-year secondary students taking history dropped from 37 to 21 per cent; in Tasmania in the same period the figures were from 20 to 13 per cent. In New South Wales, which resisted SOSE, the fall of history still seem contagious. Student numbers there dropped in those five years from 36 to 31 per cent.⁽²²⁾

On the one hand, then, there were reasons to welcome a campaign to return history as a discipline – if via the medium of Australian history – to a central place in primary and secondary education. On the other, how resourced were schools to teach it? And if a prescriptive, nationalist ‘facts you need to know’ approach was at the core of a compulsory curriculum, how effectively would it address the sagging fortunes of the discipline overall? Even the educationalist drawn in to advise the government on the curriculum, Tony Taylor, expressed concern that a ‘self-serving monoculturalism’ would be the outcome, in place of ‘critical, reflective, reflexive and multi-perspectival’ understanding.⁽²³⁾ A period of intense wrangling ensued. The Australian Historical Association – the body representing the nation’s professional historians (whether in universities, government, museums or consultancy) – was prepared to endorse a curriculum focussed on Australian history so long as it was globally contextualised, and not to the exclusion of a full range of other options for the study of history in schools. The government’s attempt to strike a balance in content, pedagogy, resources and politics led to the hasty preparation of a ‘Guide to the Teaching of Australian History in Years 9 and 10’ (to which I contributed) in the months leading up to the federal election of 2007. This patchwork document did little to clarify issues before the Howard government fell. And soon after, Anna Clark published *History’s Children*, drawing on a nation-wide survey of secondary school students and teachers that showed a profound disaffection among them with Australian history in particular. As one Western Australian schoolboy put it:

(22) Taylor, ‘Under Siege’, pp.33-35.

(23) Tony Taylor and Robert Guyver, ‘Introduction’, in Taylor and Guyver, eds., *History Wars*, p.xii

I feel like the history of Australia is relevant but I get the feeling that all through high school there's this massive push to be a patriot and to be involved and to understand about Australia. But I think it's one of the most boring countries in the world.⁽²⁴⁾

From late 2007, incoming Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, vowed to kick-start a wide range of agendas that had stalled under Howard. Most symbolic was his national apology to the generations of Aboriginal parents and children who had been separated from each under a range of government policies. That apology, famously, had been withheld by Howard on the grounds that present governments could not be held accountable for the actions of others in history. Significantly, however, Rudd called a 'truce' rather than an end to the 'history wars', characterising the division as one between 'a straight narrative history that brooks no contradictions, and an extreme relativism that is only about interpretation and not about events'.⁽²⁵⁾ This polarization of both sides reflected a view that an important middle ground still needed to be defined and held. Rudd, and his education minister, Julia Gillard, were determined to expand the concept of a national curriculum beyond history to encompass the entire school syllabus, responding to perceived deficiencies in the secondary education system overall. Together, they commenced an unprecedented centralisation of control over education, proposing a comprehensive national curriculum, national testing, national teacher registration and teacher standards. Measurement against these standards was to be directly linked to the provision of public funds. Their focus was not simply deficiencies in citizenship, but the necessity to make more fundamental progress in developing those capacities with which Australia could negotiate the dialectic between globalization and nation, and to address threats to the nation arising from fragmentation, disparity and discontent.⁽²⁶⁾

In 2008 the 'Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians' – agreed to by the Commonwealth and all state governments – began:

In the 21st century Australia's capacity to provide a high quality of life for all will depend on the ability to compete in the global economy on knowledge and innovation. Education equips young people with the knowledge, understanding, skills and values to take advantage of opportunity and to face the challenge of this era with confidence.

The document continued:

Schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation's

(24) Anna Clark, *History's Children: History Wars in the Classroom, Melbourne*: Melbourne University Press, 2009, p.1.

(25) ABC News transcript, 28 August 2009.

(26) Terri Seddon, 'National Curriculum in Australia? A matter of politics, powerful knowledge and the regulation of learning', *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, vol.9, no.3, 2001, p.319.

ongoing prosperity and social cohesion.⁽²⁷⁾

This language in itself indicates the framework for this next phase of curriculum decisions, including those relating to history. It also, with a remarkably bold instrumentalism, articulates the terms in which an historical perspective might inform these priorities of ‘prosperity’, ‘cohesion’ and global awareness. As Terri Seddon has argued, Australia’s national curriculum in itself becomes ‘a kind of commodity to be desired, worked for and consumed’ in the new millennium’s identity politics of ‘global citizenship’. It is a range of ‘users’ – parents, governments, industry – which make the fundamental ‘choices’ about what should be included into a curriculum that is ‘delivered’ by teachers to students.⁽²⁸⁾

Currently, versions of the national curriculum are being developed across all areas of primary and secondary school education in Australia, from Year 1 (6-7 year olds) to Year 12 (17-18 year olds), although at different rates. The curricula in English, History, Mathematics (to Year 10) and Science (to Year 10) are in ‘implementation’ phases; Arts, Physical Education, Civics and Citizenship, Economics and Business, Languages, Geography and Technologies are among those still in ‘writing’ phases.

Of its nature, a national curriculum sets uniform standards, processes and measures. The body established to oversee this process, the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is clear on this point:

[The National Curriculum] makes clear what all young Australians should learn as they progress through schooling. It is the foundation for high quality teaching to meet the needs of all Australian students.

Critics are already questioning how effectively these goals are being met. Australia does well in international benchmarking, scoring relatively high educational ‘outcomes’. But it does less well in dealing with educational inequality, in achieving that genuine inclusiveness in schools which often needs to be tackled at local levels, in the diagnosis of learning difficulties and adaptations of curriculum to needs and circumstances. The focus on developing the content and systems of each discipline in a uniform curriculum can seem to be at the cost of adaptability and resources in how it is *taught*. Experience of such processes elsewhere – including of performance-measurement systems, tied to funding – indicates that they have particularly adverse impacts on teaching in less advantaged classrooms, and ‘stop teachers from generating transformative pedagogies which could make a difference’.⁽²⁹⁾

(27) *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Training and Youth Affairs), 2008, p.4.

(28) Terri Seddon, ‘National Curriculum in Australia? A matter of politics, powerful knowledge and the regulation of learning’, *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, vol.9, no.3, 2001, pp.307, 319-20, 326.

(29) Bill Atweh and Parlo Singh, ‘The Australian curriculum: continuing the conversation’, *Australian Journal of Education*,

The National Curriculum has three priorities across all areas: Australia and Asian engagement; sustainability; and awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. The availability of teachers with a background in ‘Asian engagement’ – particularly if it is assumed to have some language component – is minimal, and declining. Ironically, it has also been observed that prescriptive curriculum driven methods, when applied to schools in remote Aboriginal communities in Australia, result in a ‘differential provision’ of content, based on a self-fulfilling judgment of what students can comprehend and what employment options are open to them. Real differences are only made in the education of these most chronically disadvantaged students when teachers have flexibility in framing their studies and no judgments are made, or implied, about how the student might seek to participate in ‘the global economy’, that ‘economy’ in itself being a subject of careful, culturally-nuanced appraisal. Arguably, the same generalised attention to impacts rather than local opportunities accounted for the disengagement Alison Clark found among most school students from questions of Aboriginal or environmental history.⁽³⁰⁾

Nonetheless, the market is now open for textbooks to serve the History curriculum – publishers are jockeying for access, consultants are busy, but Australia’s state governments, which will have ultimate control over what is taught in their schools, remain non-committal about the resources they will make available. One offering, from Cambridge University Press, was published earlier this year, in four handsome, well-designed and produced textbooks which are designed to directly guide classroom practice. These texts were prepared by panels of academic and secondary school teachers of history, drawn from around Australia, with the objective of enabling ‘students and teachers across the nation to work on the same topics and themes, placing their own local stories in national and global contexts’. In her foreword to each volume, Angela Woollacott states:

We understand the importance of Aboriginal history, and we now expect to learn about the historical experiences of Australians’ families and ancestors who arrived here from various regions of the world. People who have made history include peasants and kings, ancient Egyptians and ancient Australians, women and men, and people from a wide range of cultures, traditions and linguistics backgrounds.

As that formulation implies, the national curriculum is addressed to students in the context of contemporary issues, national transitions, and global dynamics. Woollacott continues: ‘*The Australian Curriculum: History* is innovative in its balance between world history and Australian history, and in placing Australian history in the context of Asian and Pacific histories, for

vol.55, no.3, 2011, pp.4-10.

(30) Robyn Hewitson, ‘Restoring Curriculum Engagement’, *Curriculum Centre Stage* (Australian Curriculum Studies Association), 2007, pp.316-7.

example, as well as European, American and other histories.’⁽³¹⁾

The guiding themes in each volume are constant, although their sophistication increases with each school year. For Year 8 (13-14 year olds), they are:

Understanding change and continuity

Building an historical vocabulary

Analysing primary and secondary sources (later years are introduced to the concept of ‘synthesising sources’ and evaluating ‘online’ materials)

Identifying perspectives in sources

Writing skills (later including ‘persuasive writing’)

Speaking skills

The focus for Year 8 is: ‘The ancient to the modern world (650-1750)’. The first question posed in this, as in each volume, is ‘Why is this relevant?’ to which the answer is given:

Studying the rise and fall of these civilizations helps us to understand changes in the world today, such as the growing importance of the Asian powers. Learning about the spread of Christianity and Islam, and their interactions both through peaceful and violent conflict, gives us insight into the relations between Muslims and Christianity today’.⁽³²⁾

Historical knowledge, then, is explicitly placed in relation to contemporary interests. So, for example, Year 8 are introduced to Japan via ‘Japan under the Shoguns 794-1867’, the rationale being given as:

Japan is once again a world power, adapting to international influences while retaining essential aspects of its national identity that have a powerful impact in the wider world.

The central question students are asked is: ‘Which significant Japanese people, groups and ideas from this period have influenced the world today?’⁽³³⁾

There is no specific Australian content for Year 8. They had some in Year 7, in the context of ‘The Ancient World’, its relevance being: ‘The evolution of our shared ancestors in Africa, and how and where early civilisations developed, are key parts of a long and fascinating history from which we can learn about managing our environment’.⁽³⁴⁾ They get much more in Year 10, which covers ‘The modern world and Australia 1918-present’ and focuses on the environmental

(31) Angela Woollacott, Foreword, in Woollacott, ed., *History 8 for the Australian Curriculum*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p.vi.

(32) *History 8*, p.17.

(33) *History 8*, p.231.

(34) Angela Woollacott, ed., *History 7 for the Australian Curriculum*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p.21.

challenges of technological and economic developments; anti-colonialism; migration; and the rise of social movements and 'rights and freedoms'. In that year, students deal extensively with Nazi Germany, the holocaust, political leadership and propaganda. 'Key individuals' identified for close study in this segment are: Goering, Hess, Goebbels, Speer, Heydrich and Riefenstahl. There is no equivalent coverage of the political and cultural context of Japan's entry into World War II, and while Hideki Tojo and Isoroku Yamamoto noted as 'key people', there is no other mention of them in the text. It is, perhaps, significant in the context of the curriculum's general focus on Australia's 'place in Asia' that the Pacific War is comparatively lightly covered. Like all national curricula, present relationships are managed and placed in perspective here.

This brief sample will have to suffice – but there is perhaps enough here to suggest the approach taken. The History curriculum is impressive in forging links between past and present that are not forced, that do not play to simplistic 'compare and contrast' treatments, and engage students with questions of disciplinary method and perspectives. In discussing Australia's post-war immigration program, for example, students are invited to undertake a role play: one group to write a letter from recently arrived immigrant home to her family; another to compose a report by an immigration official to his supervisor on the difficulties of processing and accommodating immigrants.⁽³⁵⁾ Social, political, cultural, environmental, technological and economic histories are woven through the syllabus. And national history is placed thoughtfully in the context of global dynamics. There is, no doubt, a question to be asked about the extent to which a curriculum so explicitly framed around current 'relevance' can adapt to change in contemporary circumstances, and also about the assumptions on which it is built. There is, for example, a striking congruence between the view of the world to be presented in Australian schools through this curricula – and the place in it of Australian citizens as dynamic, cosmopolitan citizens – and the focus of *Australia in the Asian Century* on developing a new congruence between Australia and the rising middle classes of Asia. This focus on Australia's search for a 'place' amid change might not be the same as others' perceptions of obstacles to it.

This is my assessment – that at least this version of the national curriculum in history, whatever reservations there might be about the larger project, has advanced considerably beyond the 'history wars' of ten years ago, and beyond the 'massive push to be a patriot' that deterred students of Australian history. But this is a view not universally shared. In the lead-up to Australia's most recent federal election, which saw the return of a Liberal government led by Tony Abbott, it was clear this particular curricula was in their sights. Early in the campaign Abbott spoke of the need to 'rethink' the history curriculum, which had become 'politicised'.⁽³⁶⁾ The incoming minister for education, Christopher Pyne, backed his leader, stating that the issue was as much one of standards as politics, but on both counts the curriculum was flawed.

(35) Angela Woollacott, ed., *History 10 for the Australian Curriculum*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p.274

(36) 'Time to re-think history', *Australian*, 3 September 2013

There was no balance in what students were being asked to study.⁽³⁷⁾ Too much Asia, not enough Australia; too much environment, not enough progress; too much change, not enough heritage. Social commentators have rallied to theme: the overarching themes of Asian engagement, sustainability and indigenous perspectives, were impositions on students who had yet to get the ‘fundamental building blocks’ of basic skills and concepts.⁽³⁸⁾

It is hard to imagine that the momentum in developing such resources will simply come to a halt, and the process start all over again. It is backed, more than the Howard initiative ever was, by a solid investment in providing teaching resources and disciplinary reflection as well as content and an overall policy priority for boosting education as a national resource. But – if only for the enduring politics of the issues: of national history, pedagogy and citizenship – it will come under close scrutiny. Its case has probably not been helped by a title page graphic for one volume which shows a group of citizens in silhouette, centring on a child holding a placard ‘Sorry’ – all with their backs to us except a young, post-war immigrant (wearing the cap of the European refugee and with suitcase) and a young Aboriginal dancer, adorned with traditional body paint.

IV. Current historical scholarship

This rising debate over the History curriculum indicates that causes for anxiety have not disappeared – certainly not in terms of the public role attributed to Australian history. But how does this relate to the ‘state of the discipline’ as practiced? Mark McKenna concludes his chapter in the *Cambridge History* noting that a ‘hesitant and uneasy’ state continues in historical practice in Australia. That condition, he suggests, reflects still unsettled questions arising from the colonial past and compounded by environmental impacts on the land itself, but also by the tension between a professional historical practice that seeks *distance* from the past, as a subject to be comprehended in its difference, and more popular forms of practice which seek to be *present* in the past, and work with ‘the language of immediacy, spectacle, recreation’.⁽³⁹⁾ Negotiating between these points is not only a choice between the professional and the popular, but of dealing with a more pervasive ‘democratisation of historical writing’ identified by Dipesh Chakrabarty: a longer term process in which the inclusiveness sought by social history has expanded to accommodate the politics of recognition, representation and authenticity. In this trajectory, as Chakrabarty warns, history’s role in the assertion of an ‘identity’ to which subjects have an inherent or compensatory right overwhelms its older claim to understand such identities in terms of struggle, ideology, power, conflict or destiny.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Chakrabarty’s comments

(37) Pyne puts focus on standards’, *Australian*, 28 September 2013

(38) Judith Sloan, ‘National Curriculum Mired by Half-Baked Fads’, *Australian*, 12 October 2013.

(39) McKenna, ‘Anxiety’, pp.579-80.

(40) Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Reconciliation and Its Historiography’ Some Preliminary Thoughts’, *UTS Review*, vol.7, no.3, 2001, p.68.

have a general, disciplinary field of reference. But they were also prompted by the ways in which the Aboriginal reconciliation movement, and the impact of the personal testimonies of ‘stolen generations’ of Aboriginal children, has rendered the concept of Aboriginal identity in Australian history unproblematic in itself, something to be recovered *from* history rather than something seen as enmeshed *in* history. This assumption, whatever its political power, Chakrabarty cautions, might not necessarily be good historical practice. It might, in fact, only serve to dull the longer term theoretical and political evolution of the discipline.

There is not scope here for any effective survey of current historical scholarship in Australia. But the issue Chakrabarty raises – as a practitioner of Indian subaltern history who currently moves between academic positions in the United States and Australia – has a central place in my argument here. Australian history has sought to accommodate a diversity of different voices over recent decades, beginning with voices of class and gender, moving on to those of ethnicity, race, sexuality and environmental attachment, and most recently those of transnational experience and mobility. It has, undoubtedly, become a more inclusive historiography as a result. But in terms of its nagging ‘anxiety’ – or ‘anxieties’ – to what extent has it addressed those two core problems identified at the outset of this paper? First, McKenna’s sense of the unresolved quest for/preoccupation with a ‘foundational narrative’. Second, a desire to retain a capacity to speak directly *to* the nation rather than to offer an account *of* the nation – one that might, of necessity, be challenging, taxing, multi-perspectival, comparative, or driven by questions of a theoretical kind? To ‘question’, as Atkinson puts it, rather than ‘entertain’?

My point is not there has been any dumbing-down in Australian history: these two elements of anxiety reflect an earnestness of purpose rather than a derogation of duty. As Bain Attwood has argued, the ‘empathy’ that has driven the inclusiveness of Australian history (in his case, in Aboriginal history especially) has had the benefit of reclaiming a sense of authentic experience, but might also have had the effect of distracting attention from issues of historical change, causation and contextualization, and minimized the ‘distancing’ of the subject that is central to the power of historical knowledge in actively explaining the specific conditions of difference between past and present.⁽⁴¹⁾ Revealingly, the students Anna Clark surveyed were most antithetical to Aboriginal history as a component of Australian history not because of their racism but because there was so little ‘distance’ created between the contemporary politics of a national response to violence dispossession and an historical engagement with the dynamic contexts of colonization and resistance.⁽⁴²⁾ What ‘we’ did to ‘them’ was no way to generate historical interest.

Australian history, for all its diversity, has still got a way to go in breaking that ‘we’ into meaningful historical components. What Ghassan Hage terms ‘white multiculturalism’

(41) Bain Attwood, ‘In the Age of Testimony: The Stolen Generations Narrative, “Distance” and Public History’, *Public Culture*, vol.20, no.1, 2008, pp.92-4.

(42) Clark, *History’s Children*, pp.70-72.

still prevails, for example, in much of the history of immigration – and will, perhaps, until immigrants themselves move from memoir and autobiography to write histories.⁽⁴³⁾ But even then, the histories they write will perhaps not be histories of immigration *to* Australia – national histories of immigration – but histories of mobility, disruption, opportunity, choice and no-choice that are not defined by national borders. The same is true of the rising interest in transnational history, which has had the benefit of breaking down Australian stereotypes of ‘here’ and ‘elsewhere’ but is still mainly concerned with ‘us’ going to ‘them’. And to the extent that Australian history (and the national curriculum) seems to follow the imperatives of Australian policy, it is arguable whether *Australia in the Asian Century* gets to the heart of what is really changing in the region, which is possibly a good deal more than the consumer choices of a generic middle class (what ‘we’ can sell to ‘them’). If history is to be relevant to the world we live, it will need to change; if it is to be relevant to the world of information through which we increasingly gain that experience, it will probably need to change more.

In terms of anxiety, however, and the aftermath of the History Wars, I am currently dealing with a problem. I have a part-time position in the Research Centre at the National Museum of Australia, where my role includes offering advice on the relevant historiography, and historical debates, relating to exhibition proposals. In 2015, the NMA will be expected to mount an exhibition on Australia’s entry into World War I with the botched beach landing of ANZAC troops on the beaches of Gallipoli, Turkey, on 25 April. This, in terms of heritage, was where the young Australian nation ‘proved itself in a baptism of fire’. The date of that landing became ANZAC Day, which is observed with increasing solemnity across Australia as our one, true national day – in part because the events it commemorates inscribed Australia into a history other than our own. ANZAC Day was also at the core of Howard’s sense of a history to celebrate (and not of Keating’s vision: he preferred Kokoda to Gallipoli – in Papua New Guinea, Keating said, we were fighting for ourselves, not Empire). But what new can be said about ANZAC Day, and what new about World War I – especially in a social history museum, that seeks to recapture the immediacy of historical experience? As often, the national curriculum in History is remarkably advanced in its suggestions. Drawing on a good deal of recent historical scholarship, it deals with World War I in Year 9, beginning with militarization themes but them subtly evolving to a more interrogative mode: ‘If we shift the focus away from the flag-waving crowds and look across the entire nation, what do we see?’ Students are encouraged to debate positions, to take the role of – for example – ‘a pro-war loyalist, a pacifist, a eugenicist, a socialist, a wounded soldier, a grieving parent’. They are invited to empathize with a range of different views, to consider ethnic, class, religious and social divisions, to consider what returned soldiers might have found difficult, to reflect on the forms that grief might have taken. They are asked to live

(43) Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Sydney: Pluto, 1993 (ガッサン・ハージ著、保莉実・塩原良和訳『ホワイト・ネイション——ネオ・ナショナリズム批判』平凡社、2003年)。

through a war of increasing horror, not to see it retrospectively as a test of courage and sacrifice. They are even invited to debate whether 'ANZAC Day was as much a political creation [of conservative political forces in the 1920s] rather than a spontaneous people's event'. But these, we know already, are not the new government's view. Already it speaks of 'celebrating' rather than 'commemorating' ANZAC. And it is not the view many people have in the community. World War I is prime 'cult of memory' territory, with as many (white, non-recent immigrant) Australians as possible seeking to find an ancestor's name on an honour roll, or in a war grave, or lost in action list. Bruised once in the past, the NMA is wondering how far it can go now in bringing an increasingly complex historiography into an increasingly narrow field of public investment in history. The answer is far from simple.