

Old and new Australia

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The first issue of the *ANU History Journal* (1964–87), which Ron Fraser, Anne Kingston and I edited, looks quite artisanal with its blue and white cardboard cover and its typed content. Dusting it off, I wonder what I could write about it without claiming too much. Almost certainly, few of the articles in it remain compulsory reading, even for apprentice historians. So what is its significance among the thousands of journals that have seen the light and, like shooting stars, had but an ephemeral life?

Fifty plus years after we set it up, and without the sense of continuity that Ron Fraser has had—I have lived in France for nigh on 20 years and was never a keeper of the archive—I have decided to write, not of the Journal's 'prehistory' per se, but about the historical milieu that accompanied its birth. I am interested in the people and the traditions, old and emerging, that made the *ANUJ* possible, and which might also remind me why I still believe the Journal played a very small but meaningful part in the sea change in the study of history in Australia.

My take, of course, is 'presentist'. When the ruling Australian orthodoxy today includes Tom Griffiths' presentist and literary approach, it is salutary to remember what it meant to be a historian in Australia before the sea change; and perhaps too long after it. The story that follows is how I recall it all in 1958–66 when I was first at the Canberra University College (CUC), and then at The Australian National University (ANU). In that time, Australia and Australian historians were part of a derivative and parochially Anglo-Saxon culture where all roads led to Britain and to Oxbridge, whose standards and canons were those of the imperial world. If you were 'any good', you went to the 'Mother Country' to do further studies; though not necessarily a PhD, which was still often considered some sort of Germanic/American new-fangledness.

Perhaps unjustly, when we, the early products of the PhD programs of ANU, entered the academy, we muttered darkly about professors who had done their PhDs in Britain, then returned straight home to chairs

and never did anything thereafter. As I realised 10 years later, the real story was much more complex. Many of the history professors who were in situ after 1966 had, I believed by 1976, been so tetanised by all the erudition, standards and brilliance ‘over there’ that they developed writers’ block. Andrew Wells, an ANU PhD student writing of the labour historians of that era between 1950 and 1980 in *Labour History*—which was coeval with the *ANUHI*—emphasised how much even they, who were often Marxist, were in thrall to Oxbridge and London (a slightly different kettle of fish, as many of its teachers were Oxbridge rejects).

In sum, when the first issue of the *ANUHI* was published in 1964, Australia was still largely a world in which history writing aped that taught in the ‘Mother Country’, especially their commonsensical methods. Ranke might have been pleased: historians just read the archives, where the law of self-evidence applied. The fact that a historian might make sense of the evidence and craft the story they told was not made central to our concerns as students—we were to be mere conduit pipes for what had happened. Historiography, where the very notion of interpretation and critical inquiry was investigated, did not bulk large. Where it was considered, it was often stodgy. To put it brutally, the study of history could be boringly, Britishly, parochial. It took a brilliant, innovative teacher swimming against the current to bring it to life for their students. I remember reading *How Labour Governs* but not *What Happened in History*, despite Vere Gordon Childe being one of the Australian historians who had been ‘good enough’ to make it into the British academy.¹

Around 1948, however, a ripple began in the imperial pond of Anglo-Irish Australia. The war, and criticism of Britain’s treatment of Australians in it, came home with ex-servicemen who undertook university study under government training schemes. A growing sense of national identity was revealed in the *Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948*—later the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948*—which foreshadowed political independence. National pride and a belief in the Australian ability to go at it alone, even in matters of the mind, lay behind the creation of the Australian ‘National’ University in 1946. However, *idées reçues* die hard. All the first directors of its schools were Australians who had followed the imperial path to success and now, as nationalists, wanted to come home and help. Something of the tensions engendered can be gauged from ‘Sir Keith’s’

1 Vere Gordon Childe, *How Labour Governs* (London: Labour Publishing Co., 1923); Vere Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1942).

(that is what we called him) *Country and Calling*.² The directors all had a deep love for Australia but were often guarded about its ability to meet international standards. This was especially so in the ‘social sciences’.

Many benefited from the new Australian confidence. Quiet and modest and therefore quaintly traditional (they greeted each other with appellations like ‘Mr Dean’), some found jobs after 1958 in the new universities that were created to meet ‘national’ needs. The Murray Report in 1957 had spawned these universities: Monash, then Latrobe, Flinders, Macquarie and so on. CUC became the School of General Studies when it amalgamated with ANU in 1960. By 1964, the era of mass education had arrived, but only just.

Canberra itself grew mightily, as Ulrich Ellis remembers in his memoirs: the ‘nation for a continent’ entailed centralisation and an enlarged federal state that began to supplant the dominance of the states. Most CUC and ANU students in 1958–64 were public servants. Many had recently arrived from the state capitals (to which they returned on weekends) and they were allowed to leave the office at 3.30 pm to crowd into the 4.15 pm lecture at Childers Street Hall. Most were studying economics, but a few did law and a tiny minority, history. I was one of the latter: a law/history student. We went to the Childers Street ‘huts’, tiny hot rooms, sleeping a dozen or so, identical to those in the migrant hostels. The word ‘part-time’ summed up our university lives, and in my case an approach to a kaleidoscopic life. In this, we were part of the newly fragmented postwar Australia, a real crucible of novelty and difference that was replacing the orders and certitudes of old Australia.

The prospect of building the nation had brought ex-servicemen not only to Canberra, but also into the universities. They were not the sons and daughters of the squattocracy, and they were sometimes ‘on the Left’. The ‘reffos’ found a place as well. Young immigrants both fleeing Nazism or escaping their complicity with that regime, arrived *en masse* in Canberra (and the mythical Snowy). Some moved from being students in the late 1940s and 1950s to being university teachers. By the 1960s, some were professors. A photo of the graduating class at Trinity College in which Ken Inglis—so important to the *ANUHJ*—found himself, captures something of this new assortment of student and scholars.

2 WK Hancock, *Country and Calling* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954).

The first breach in the ‘traditional’ student body—of course, the sons and daughters of the old rural ruling class were still there—was not as important as the flood into the universities of the progeny of the massive assisted-migration programs of the 1950s and 1960s. On my desk, I have a photo of the first history honours year at ANU, taken in 1961 or 1962 (Figure 1). Except for one woman, all the others (four, including the photographer) were ten-pound fare Poms, and all but one were from working-class families. Our parents had fled the poverty, dullness and lack of opportunity of British life for the ‘happy mediocrity’ of Australia, where it was thought that you could easily find a job. This informed us too: we were not assiduous students intent on success or glittering prizes.



Figure 1: Honours history staff and students at Broulee in 1961.

Standing: Manning Clark, Don Baker, Malcolm Harrison, Alastair Davidson, Daphne Gollan and Dorothy Walker; crouching: Eric Fry, Keith Campbell and Tim Suttor. The photographer was probably Bob Reece or Geoffrey Fairbairn.

Collection: Private papers of Alastair Davidson.

With this motley lot of old and new Australians came a project to ‘rediscover’ Australian history. An Australian readership does not need to be told that there had already been Australian historians and historians of Australia of some note. It was the way in which Australia’s history now became of central importance: the shift from Empire to the nation. At ANU, new frontiers and peoples increasingly became of historical interest, including the USSR and the US, together with the history of Empire and the Pacific.

The centrality of the History Department in this innovation was owed to Professor Manning Clark and his two volumes of *Select Documents of Australian History*.³ He and his colleagues transmitted a love and enthusiasm for Australia and its history to us. We read, learned and digested that history. And we got indigestion from the accompanying Barossa Pearl,⁴ the singing of folk songs newly disinterred by researchers at ANU, as we were led on discoveries of the South Coast. The major player in the ‘return to Bungendore’ week was one of the first ANU history honours students (Bob Reece)—whose honours studies combined history and the study of literature.⁵

Today we know that Clark had a particular vision of Australian history that many regarded, and still do regard, as idiosyncratic. But we should not forget that he came from the old Australia (he had made the pilgrimage to Oxbridge, which he revered). Nor that his early, still read, now disputed, articles on the convict origins were models of Anglo historical scholarship in their time. His colleagues in the department were exclusively Australian. Two, perhaps three, were scions of squatter families, their own family histories deeply buried in white Australia’s past. They were not all Protestant, however. There was a Roman Catholic, a fervent convert, a Jewish communist, and so on. Clark had stuck his neck out making these appointments. His ANU allies in the rediscovery of Australia—

3 CMH Clark, *Select Documents in Australian History, 1788–1850* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1950).

4 First launched in Australia in 1956, the same year as the Melbourne Olympic Games, Barossa Pearl was a popular light and fruity sparkling wine.

5 During Bush Week, ANU students went on a day-long ‘pilgrimage to Bungendore’, a small historic town only 45 minutes drive from Canberra, as a way of celebrating the bush ethos. As well as kick-starting the local economy at the local pubs, students sometimes listened to a lecture, visited the cemetery, went on tours and picnics, and sung folk songs. In the late 1960s, as the number of students involved in the pilgrimage grew, the trip to Bungendore drew fierce criticism, especially from local residents, who were concerned about the dangerous and disorderly behaviour of hundreds of university students converging on the town.

AD Hope, Bob Brissenden and outsiders like David Campbell, Judah Waten and Barry Humphries—both reduplicated the traditional flavour and hinted at something more.

Alien Son was not on any reading list, but I read it after Manning had us meet Judah at dinner.⁶ For an ‘outsider’ like myself and many of the other immigrant sons, the story of the Jewish communist in Australia or the bizarre critic of everyday life, Barry Humphries, struck a deeply resonating chord. Given our assisted passage experiences—not easy but not racist either—we had usually held down jobs (and not just as holiday jobs) and were sometimes union members. We knew Australia as a place of struggle and conflict—beside ‘God’ professors like Manning, our heroes were people like Ian Turner, a mature-age PhD student, always ready to come down to give a seminar that left us breathless. He embodied some of the change and fragmentation taking place, as did his mate Edgar Waters, pioneer collector of Australian folklore and song. Ian was to-the-manner-born, but also a communist who had cleaned out railway carriages, and who participated in the disordering of the old Australia out of which the new national consciousness was being built.

Old myths were demolished and historians advocated a return to the archive. Noel Ebbels’ collection of labour history documents was set up as a heroic model to follow. This continuity with traditional methods led us to the archives then buried under External Affairs in Canberra, and later to the mythical Mitchell in Sydney. Presence in those places was a sign of seriousness.

On reflection, the real novelty was not this historiographical turn to Australia, or even the idea that we should tread where Thomas Berry had. That might never have given us the temerity, the chutzpah or even the desire to set up the *ANUHI*. Rather, it was Manning’s way of doing history, which he taught us delicately, often almost individually.

The first form this took was an emphasis on historiography, one of the courses that left a permanent impress on my mind. As always, lecturers were encouraged to teach what they thought doing history was. Manning had us read Gibbon, Prescott, Parkman and Motley.⁷ Inglis directed us to

6 Judah Waten, *Alien Son* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1952).

7 For example, Edward Gibbons, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88); William H Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1943); Francis Parkman Jr, *France and England in North America* (1865–92); John Motley, *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* (1856).

Frederick Jackson Turner and Potter's *People of Plenty*.⁸ The object was that we understood that there is no single, true, incontrovertible story, only interpretations and, indeed, that everyone interprets, even the audience—the reader who completes the sense of any text. The authorit(arianism) of the discipline, with its *d'haut en bas* view of history, was coming to an end. Perhaps, by encouraging us to put ourselves in the place of the American historian of the Aztecs as he blindly galloped around on his horse, Manning was doing no more than encouraging the notion—to which he certainly adhered—that we can recreate an experience of the past.

We were also introduced to a *bête noire* of the British historical establishment, RG Collingwood, and to JB Bury's *Idea of Progress*,⁹ who were presented more favourably to my memory than contemporary British philosophers of history. On a personal level, Manning spent much time with me (or perhaps all of us?) on what it was to write history, making endless corrections along the lines that 'English is a German not a Latin language'. 'Write in the active voice'. 'Tell a story'. His concern with style reinforced—almost unconsciously—the idea that we each had our story to tell about what had, or was, happening. Among the literary figures we were encouraged to read were Furphy (for the birth of the nationally popular idiom), KS Pritchard, Henry Handel Richardson and Kenneth Slessor's *Five Bells*¹⁰—the last author alerting us to the problems of *dépaysement*.

Only when Manning started to publish his *History of Australia* did it become clear where he was going and how he was challenging Australian history written up to that time. His work was savagely criticised by the academy, traditional authorities in the lead. It is notable that they focused on the factual errors, not on the way he made sense of Australian history. Certainly, he departed from the tradition, symbolised by his retreat up the ladder to his eyrie in what is now Manning Clark House. He told his story of Australia, about where he came from, in a style that his critics missed entirely, but which made him internationally up-to-date if not welcome in the British academy. He eschewed mathesis—archival facts—in favour of poetry as the place of truth. He wrote a history of mentalities

8 David M Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

9 JB Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1921).

10 Kenneth Slessor, *Five Bells: XX Poems* (Sydney: FC Johnson, 1939).

without reference to the Annales school's contemporary work. (As an aside, they too were excluded for a generation from the academy by the historians of the 'événementielle', or the facts: no jobs for fools who try to make sense otherwise.) He hinted that today, to be a historian one must be a philosopher; that, in comparative perspective, was what all those passages about flaws in the clay amounted to. He made Australian history ex-centric or eccentric by looking in a new way. Only one book about his work, John Lechte's, ever acknowledged those mighty leaps.¹¹ But then Lechte would study in Paris and himself defect to French thought as a sociology professor.

You might wonder what Manning Clark's own view of history has to do with the *ANUJ* in 1964. After all, the first volume of Clark's *History* only appeared in 1962. The articles in the *ANUJ* seem quite traditional in their paraphernalia and their style, which has little of the poetic or even the baroque to it. And if a novel focus on the craft and the responsibility of the historian was being fostered in the History Department of that era, there is comparatively little evidence of it in the first issue. There is also little evidence that suggests a concern with any radically new angle or approach. It is written mainly in the limp style of the time—mostly in good English. The articles are about what happened, without much sense that all that is being told is one person's story, more or less convincingly.

But it could also be argued that seeds were planted there, especially in the notion that to be a historian one had to read more than the archive. Literature and philosophy were valued as essential fields of inquiry for the historian. For me, Manning's teaching had encouraged a taste for experimentation and novelty as well as resistance to intimidation by the History machine. The *ANUJ* emerged at a time when students were expected to do their apprenticeship, sit at the feet of those who knew and, when allowed, finally to write for the recognised journals of the time. No one departed too far from the canon, especially not those wet behind the ears. Summed up, their voice was not heard until they learned to sing to the master discipline's tune.

11 John Lechte, *Politics and the Writing of Australian History: An Introductory Study* (Melbourne: Melbourne University, Political Science Department, 1979).

But we had a window of opportunity. We were being encouraged in a discipline where the lines of separation from philosophy, literature and social theory (anthropology and archaeology) were becoming blurred. Staff members backed us and wrote for the *Journal*, gaining us credibility.

No longer was it cretinism not to believe that all was resolved—truth separated from untruth—by pointing at some conclusive document in the archive, Ranke fashion. (Do not misunderstand me here, Marc Bloch's painstaking work on false documents, the honesty and responsibility of historians for what they write, was something I applauded, but it too was a challenge to the authority of the document. After all, though I did not know it at the time, the theory being restated by the 1960s was that the meaning of any text is completed by the audience.) This death of the author(ity) accompanied the empowerment of hitherto silenced social players. Among them were history students whose role had previously been to be quiet, listen and learn.

The reappearance of the *ANUHJ* might again give a voice to students whose views appear too far from those reigning in the discipline. I hope it will remain true to the spirit of 1964: that history has never been finally told until all voices are heard. Today, the imagination has been globalised and our horizons are vast compared with the more limited national vision of 1964. We were perhaps naïve and insufficiently aware of our own lack of preparation. It was perhaps hubris to think that we had much to say. But we had something to say and we said, at least some of it, in the *ANUHJ*.

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