

9. Coach Nelson

Daniel Oakman

Daniel Oakman is a senior curator with the People and the Environment team at the National Museum of Australia. He is currently developing an exhibition about cycling in Australia and working on a biography of the cyclist and politician, Sir Hubert Opperman. He maintains a strong interest in the history of Australian relations with the Asia-Pacific region.

No one has ever called me Danny. No one, that is, except Hank – and Americans. Thinking back to the first time he called me that, I'm sure that (like so many others) I reasoned that Hank probably had some familial connection to the United States. Anyway, we had just met, and I let it pass. Soon it took on a life of its own, and I quickly became 'Young Danny'. It then seemed too late to bring it up; too late, too embarrassing and, somehow, a bit rude. In truth, I liked it. In part because he always delivered my name with the same kind of irrepressible enthusiasm that he projected onto all manner of things: history, good writing, a tightly fought test match. In time, when I heard a call down the corridor for 'Young Danny', I felt it reflected the good-natured paternalism that characterised our relationship.

I'd completed two theses before embarking on my doctorate in 1998, and I knew very well that a student always owes debts to his or her supervisor. And by the end of almost four years under Hank's supervision, I had racked up quite a few – the first before we had even met. When I applied for a scholarship to The Australian National University, my 'foreign' degrees (they were from Monash University in Melbourne) were deemed less worthy than their home-grown Canberra equivalents, and I slipped down the merit list. Months after I started at ANU, I discovered that I had only been offered a position in the Division of Pacific and Asian History because someone had lobbied strongly for my admission to the program, presumably on the strength of my proposed topic and not my ranking by the university. This stroke of good fortune saved me from a career at the Australian Bureau of Statistics, where I was working at the time.

That someone, of course, was Hank Nelson, who had noticed my proposal to write a history of Australia's role in the formation and operation of the international aid program known as the Colombo Plan, once a conspicuous symbol of Australia's post-war regional engagement. By the late 1990s, although the Colombo Plan had, among many other things, sponsored thousands of Asian students to Australia, it had faded from popular memory. But not from Hank's. In

an early meeting he told me that just after World War II, non-European students in Australian universities numbered in the mere hundreds, but by the end of the 1970s, tens of thousands of Asians had studied in Australia under the scheme. This, he thought, was a phenomenon worthy of a book, and I would be best to start thinking of my work as a draft manuscript. At this same meeting, he gave me three cassette tapes from his bookshelf. They turned out to be a wonderful six-part oral history-based documentary, written and produced by Tim Bowden, on the Colombo Plan and the Australian Volunteers Abroad program. *Crossing the Barriers* was first broadcast in 1993, and Hank provided historical commentary throughout the series. Not for the last time, Hank had delivered a quiet surprise that he genuinely hoped would help improve my work.

Hank utterly confounded my ideas about the role and influence of a supervisor – and what an academic historian might be. Early in my research my mother asked about my supervisor. The best I could come up with was that Hank looked a lot like Henry Lawson, and his style was not unlike that of Australian Rules footballer and coach, Ron Barassi. ‘Good work, Danny!’ ‘Rip into it!’ This is what being supervised by Hank sounded like. Once while I was doing my grocery shopping in a north Canberra supermarket, I heard a shout down the aisle: ‘Nice chapter, Danny; looking forward to the next one!’

Like any eager young player, I was drawn to the coach’s candour and encouraged by his confidence. I fell under his spell. The yarning, the long anecdotes, the always clean and appropriate jokes and the serious conversations about good scholarship were all part of Hank’s charm. For me, it was all about his voice. That casual, knockabout tone was at once deeply familiar and absolutely alien. I grew up in what I joked to Hank was the Far East: the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne: Bayswater, Fern Tree Gully, Boronia and Wantirna. Today the inhabitants are called aspirational. When I lived there, we were called bogans – and no one was cashed-up. A crushing anti-intellectual climate that took years to overcome pervaded my high school years. Hank sounded like the people I grew up around. But I’d never really heard people who spoke like this talk so passionately about the things I had grown to care about. Surely people who sounded like this didn’t have an enthusiasm for learning, a passion for historical investigation and, most importantly, a desire to share this history with the world outside the academy. Hank’s lack of pretence and his love of clear, engaging scholarship was the perfect antidote to any misgivings I might have had about the academic world.

Just as Hank offered respite from the worst examples of academic self-regard, he also had little time for the self-absorption and self-indulgence common to many doctoral students, especially those lingering a little too long in the comfort of the Coombs building. He always told me that it was a privilege to have the freedom to research and write on a topic of my choosing for nearly four years

– a privilege that I was unlikely to experience again in my working life. How true. He also told me that it was just as unwise to spend too long on the one subject. Towards the end of my time with the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, I told him over coffee that I reckoned I would finish writing and submit my thesis in three months. ‘Three weeks sounds a bit better, Danny’.

Hank had me writing almost from the beginning. We avoided theory, embraced the richness of the archival material I was uncovering and began building the story of the Colombo Plan. The chapters were falling into place. Well, mostly. When I faltered, I received firm advice at exactly the right time. A misguided attempt to grapple with theory yielded 5,000 words of nonsensical jargon. Hank gave me the benefit of his views on the parlous state of academic writing, especially the erroneous and confusing use of the word ‘narrative’. ‘Is this really the kind of book you want to be writing?’ Well, no, it wasn’t. That was another hallmark of Hank’s supervision. In many ways, he knew what you could do (and what you really should be doing) better than you knew yourself. At the very least, he knew it before you did, and he was confident that you would catch up – eventually.

Good supervision is often about what is left unsaid. As my writing progressed, it became clear that I had been testing Hank’s patience. I went to school in the 1970s and 1980s and was among the first generation of students unburdened by having been taught the formal rules of grammar, punctuation or spelling. My early chapters were filled with the almost illegible scrawl of Hank’s pencil. It was just what I needed. In the space of six months, I learnt more about the basic grammatical rules than I had in all of high school. Evidently I still had some way to go. The more I wrote, the less my drafts bore the marks of Hank’s pencil. Fantastic, I’m really improving here, I thought. I was somewhat deflated to discover two editions of the government style guide in my pigeonhole some months later. ‘Thought these might be useful, Danny’.

Writing a full-time doctoral thesis tends to result in a kind of institutionalisation. For me, the essence of Hank’s supervision was the way he prepared his students for life on the outside. He encouraged us to look beyond the hexagonal walls of the Coombs building. Mostly he kept us mindful of our audience and the need to write with clarity and precision. But there were other things to learn. One of the things I admired most in Hank was his ability to deflate professional pomposity, to starve it of oxygen and render it impotent. After a year or so reading files at the National Archives, I wrote to the former Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, Sir Arthur Tange, requesting an interview to discuss the origins of the Colombo Plan and how the policy was administered during his tenure in the 1950s and early 1960s. Tange wrote and then telephoned to tell me in no uncertain terms why he would not grant me an interview. It was clear, he said, that I had not consulted the archives with sufficient rigour and that his

policy was only to speak to those who had. Then he hung up. No goodbye. That was it. I told Hank. He paused, read Tange's similarly curt letter and said, 'Sod the old bastard'. Another time, I mentioned to Hank that I would like to show a chapter on the Colombo Plan's role in the demise of the White Australia Policy to another Coombs-dwelling academic. 'You could, Danny', he said, 'but, you know, you'll probably find that you've got it all completely wrong'. I took his wise advice and never contacted the staff member in question.

I knew little of Hank's early work as a historian of Papua New Guinea and the Pacific. His biggest impact on my work was his 2002 book, *Chased by the Sun*. Hank's account of Australians who served in Bomber Command during World War II came out as I began to transform my thesis into a popular, publishable book. While I had taken Hank's advice to not write a dissertation for a handful of examiners and instead write a book, it still needed work; a lot of work. There was much to admire in *Chased by the Sun*. It had all the hallmarks of Hank's style as a historian: breadth, economy, balance, humour and a sensitivity to the essential humanity of those engaged in profoundly stressful and inhumane acts. With the scholarly apparatus removed, Hank could marshal a carefully selected anecdote or quote to great effect. Take this short vignette about the effect that bombing German cities could have on bomber crews. Hank described a captain calling his navigator, busy over his maps and charts, to see the firestorm engulfing Dresden. The navigator stood behind the pilot with tears running down his face. 'Christ, you poor bastards, you poor bastards. I never want to see that again, skipper, don't ever show me again, what poor bastards'.¹ Where so many military historians, overly concerned with operational details, had failed before, Hank moved seamlessly between a compelling narrative about military operations, civilian life and the complex emotional and moral universe of those involved in the bombing of Germany. On many occasions, I turned to this book seeking inspiration and always received a master class in building narrative tension without compromising historical rigour.

While Hank was naturally modest about his successes, he could be disarmingly candid about his failures. He told me how ABC Books had rolled him on the subtitle of *Chased by the Sun*, insisting that it should be '*Courageous Australians in World War Two*'. 'Well, they weren't all bloody courageous', he told them; 'mostly they were fucking terrified'. I note that in the second edition (with a different publisher) the offending adjective dropped. For me it was reassuring, if greatly disappointing, that someone as accomplished and compelling as Hank could be overruled by the marketing department. His experience was instructive. It helped ease my own frustration with the publishers of my first book, when they dismissed my suggestions over the subtitle.

¹ Hank Nelson, *Chased by the Sun: Courageous Australians in Bomber Command in World War II*, Sydney: ABC Books, 2002, p. 272.

I want to end by letting Hank have a say. When I started writing this piece I replayed my tapes of *Crossing the Barriers* and was struck by his explanation of how the Colombo Plan came into existence. I can transcribe the words, but try to imagine hearing it on radio. It is classic Nelson, spoken in his unmistakable flat tone, but animated by an insistent, short and punchy delivery.

1950. That was two years before Australia allowed Cherry Parker, the first Japanese war bride, to enter Australia. 1950. Australia had a population of 8 million, and in that 8 million less than half of one per cent were born in South, Southeast or East Asia. That was about the same percentage as it had been at the census of 1933. And it wasn't going to be much different in 1961. But in January 1950, Percy Spender, the newly appointed Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs in the Menzies Government, flew to a conference of Commonwealth foreign ministers in Colombo in Ceylon ... What became the Colombo Plan came into operation in January 1950 ... The Australians were both compassionate and self-interested. Australians wanted protection from what they thought were threats from Asia. They wanted to help Asians. And they wanted goodwill in Asia.²

His voice is still with me. It tells me to forget the blockers, the snobs or the uninterested. It tells me to get on with it. Just after I learned of Hank's death, I went home and picked up my copy of *Chased by the Sun*. I turned to the title page. He didn't have to write anything here, but I suspect that he knew that his small act of generosity, of inclusion, might help boost my confidence. It might be typical Nelson egalitarianism, but it felt like more of a graduation than sitting through an hour of names in Llewellyn Hall to receive a mass-printed certificate. It reads: 'Danny. Fellow historian. Hank'. It meant a lot to me then. Ten years later, it still does.

2 *Crossing the Barriers*, ABC Radio National, 1993.

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