Introduction

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This book was inspired initially by a conference, as many collections of essays are. The conference in our case was an Australian Studies conference held at the University of Barcelona in July 2008, organised by Sue Ballyn of the Australian Studies Centre there. The theme of the conference was Myth, Memory, and History. The papers delivered under this heading varied considerably, but a strong strand was Indigenous Australian history. John Docker, Ann Curthoys and I agreed afterwards that we would like to edit a collection of essays from the conference based on that theme. As we drew the papers together, however, we included some additional authors whose work fitted with our theme of myth, memory, and Indigenous history. Our initial nine contributors grew to 17. Our organising theme came to encompass not only the original emphasis on myth, memory and history but also the role of passion – engagement, commitment, compassion, emotion – in historical work. In different guises, this concern kept emerging.

Debates over how detached historians should be in their approach to understanding the past have been around for centuries.¹ These debates have been especially lively in Australia over the last ten years. In the midst of its ‘history wars’, author Keith Windschuttle said in a radio interview that ‘the responsibility of the historian is not to be compassionate but to be dispassionate’.² Other Australian historians, however, have argued the opposite. Greg Dening, for example, has suggested that ‘historians needed to be more compassionate if they wished to be able to fully represent the past’.³ John Thompson has commented that ‘Windschuttle’s chosen instrument has been a scalpel, his methods forensic. He says the historian must be dispassionate’.⁴ Also critical of Windschuttle’s advocacy of being dispassionate is Aboriginal lawyer, Noel Pearson, who writes that ‘Windschuttle’s correction of the leftists’

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¹ In their book, *Is History Fiction?*, Curthoys and Docker comprehensively cover various philosophical views about history writing from Herodotus and Thucydides to the late 20th and early 21st century ‘history wars’.
² Keith Windschuttle made the statement during an interview with Tony Jones on *Lateline*, an ABC television program that went to air on 3 September 2003: <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2003/s938399.htm>
³ Dening 2000.
⁴ Thompson 1994.
distortion of history is a distortion in the opposite direction’, and accuses him of inexplicable antagonism towards Aborigines, that is, that Windschuttle’s history is not at all dispassionate.\(^5\) Bain Attwood argues that it is possible to be passionate and dispassionate at the same time: ‘a good historian should be passionate, compassionate and dispassionate in reference to as many of their historical subjects as they can’.\(^6\)

As an Indigenous woman and historian who spends much time writing about Aboriginal history and Australia’s colonial past, I find this discussion of whether one ought to be compassionate or not somewhat bewildering. It is a luxury I have not been afforded. As an Indigenous scholar I am constantly reminded that I have little or no alternative but to work within a European framework to try and explain our history and experiences; it is a construct that I have to both work within and resist at the same time. The whole basis for wanting to become a historian in the first instance comes from a place deep inside me, from a desire to understand, acknowledge and come to terms with what has happened to my ancestors, my culture and my land.

Being unable to extricate oneself from one’s history is something that anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose has observed amongst many Aboriginal people. She argues that Aboriginal people find Westerners’ sense of the past to be very odd; for Aboriginal people, the past and the present are linked indissolubly through place and belonging.\(^7\) This point is very true for me as it is for many other indigenous people. For example, Maori author Linda Tuhiwai Smith has argued ‘history is important for understanding the present’ and that ‘reclaiming history is a critical and essential part of decolonisation’.\(^8\) Aboriginal historian Jackie Huggins has stated that ‘her love of history stems from her displacement as an Aboriginal person and like most students [she] was fed on a diet of lies and invisibility about the true history of Australia’.\(^9\)

The ideal of being dispassionate and ‘objective’ has led many non-Indigenous scholars to express doubts about the truth value of Indigenous stories about what happened in the past. Literary critic and historian Penny Van Toorn warns that we must never underestimate the extent of agency used in the making and deployment of Indigenous storytelling.\(^10\) Historians Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan point out that oral narratives are heavily reliant upon memory; ‘life stories or subjective accounts’, they suggest, are ‘very often self-marked by their own particular motives, aspirations, attitudes and conscience’.\(^11\) Also sceptical

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\(^5\) Pearson 2009.
\(^6\) Attwood 2005. See also Gaita 2000, whom Attwood discusses.
\(^8\) Smith 1999: 29-30.
\(^9\) Huggins 1998: 120.
\(^10\) Van Toorn 2001: 3.
is literary critic, Adam Shoemaker, who contended in 2004 that there were very few Aboriginal historians, and that in their absence there have been many Black Australian literary views of history that ran the risk of over-compensating the bias of white interpretations.\textsuperscript{12}

These ideas of distortion and over-compensation are very curious. Jackie Huggins points out that whites are more likely than Indigenous people to distort the reality of Australia’s indigenous past, because many are still in denial over how they took the land off Aboriginal people in the first place.\textsuperscript{13} And was Margaret Tucker overcompensating when she and others told their stories in the groundbreaking film \textit{Lousy Little Sixpence}?\textsuperscript{14} Were black activists of the 1970s overcompensating when Gary Foley and others permitted filmmaker Alessandro Cavadini to film their protests at the ‘tent embassy’ and told their stories about the plight of Aboriginal people and land theft in rural Australia?\textsuperscript{15}

As these examples indicate, documentary filmmakers rather than academic historians have understood Indigenous history most compassionately. Film has been a most powerful historical medium. One wonders what would have happened if Western Australian parliamentarian Bill Grayden had not been accompanied by Doug Nicholls and his camera when he visited Aboriginal people in the Warburton Ranges in 1957.\textsuperscript{16} In addition, what might we have known of Eddie Mabo’s fight for his beloved Mer Island, if Trevor Graham had not made the film, \textit{Mabo: Life of an Island Man}?\textsuperscript{17} Eight years earlier, in 1981, Eddie Mabo had given a lecture about land ownership and inheritance on Mer Island to a group of academics at James Cook University, but it was Graham’s film that moved so many people to understand the issues.\textsuperscript{18} These are stories that were missing from the history books in our schools, but when Indigenous people eventually told them they changed the way the world viewed Indigenous

\textsuperscript{12} Shoemaker 2004: 130-132.
\textsuperscript{13} I interviewed Jackie Huggins for \textit{Vote Yes for Aborigines}.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Lousy Little Sixpence}, a film made by Alec Morgan, narrates early struggles for Aboriginal land rights and self-determination, and depicts the removal of Aboriginal children and their subsequent employment as domestic servants and labourers.
\textsuperscript{15} Alessandro Cavadini and Carolyn Strachan made the film \textit{Ningla a Na} in 1972. This documentary records the events surrounding the establishment of the Aboriginal tent embassy on the lawns of Parliament House. It incorporates interviews with black activists, the work of the National Black Theatre, Aboriginal Legal Service and Aboriginal Medical Service, plus footage from the demonstrations and arrests at the embassy. Synopsis by \textit{Street Smart Films}.
\textsuperscript{16} The Grayden film (colour/no sound) runs for 20 minutes and contained confronting images of Aboriginal poverty, starvation, injury, and disease in the Warburton and Rawlinson Ranges. Discussed in Ann Curthoys’ chapter in this volume.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Land Bilong Islanders} is a film that follows Queensland’s Supreme Court to Murray Island, the centre of a legal battle that forever altered relationships between black and white in Australia. Synopsis by Ronin Films.
\textsuperscript{18} In 1981, Eddie Mabo gave a lecture at a Land Rights conference at James Cook University and ‘spelt out what land ownership and land inheritance was all about on Mer Island’, James Cook University’s News and Media page: <http://cms.jcu.edu.au/news/archive/JCUPRD_031129>
history. For many years, Indigenous voices had struggled against the silence about Aboriginal history; eventually, through film and oral history, they were finally able to make themselves heard.

While some white historians are suspicious of Indigenous stories about the past, those involved deeply in oral history have been more welcoming of oral story telling. Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, for example, urge historians to make an extra effort to bring more oral histories into the public domain if they would like to make real progress towards the heart of matters.19 Historian Linda Tuhuiwai Smith adds an indigenous perspective, taking issue with those who think of indigenous oral narratives as an inferior form of historical practice. Writing, she says, ‘has been viewed as the mark of a superior civilization and other societies have been judged, by this view, to be incapable of thinking critically and objectively or having distance from ideas or emotion’.20

I find it curious that any text-based historian would consider writing about Aboriginal people without ever engaging with them. I am at a complete loss to understand why any white historian might suppose himself or herself unmarrred and unencumbered by his or her own white prejudices.

It seems to me that indigenous accounts of history do not have to be in conflict with the evidence supplied in white documentation, but if there is a discrepancy, then perhaps we could ask historians to be just as critical of white-authored documents as they are of Aboriginal oral accounts. I believe that one’s responsibility as a historian is to seek knowledge of an indigenous viewpoint and lived experience, and to look for additional evidence that might support that view, or at least explain why it exists. Our aim should be not to undermine indigenous perspectives and squabble about whether Aborigines are ‘accurate’, but rather to understand their viewpoint with compassion, and at the very least, ‘include’ it, consider it. For me, the inclusion of Aboriginal voices as primary sources is an absolute must for understanding and practising Aboriginal history.

The essays in this book all deal with questions of truth, myth, memory, and passionately engaged history, though in very different ways. Several consider massacre myths, ranging from the idea that there were no massacres (Ray Evans, Lyndall Ryan, John Docker), to the idea that the first few years of contact were peaceful and massacres only came later (Rachel Standfield). Some chapters consider several other pervasive myths, such as the myth of Aboriginal male idleness (Shino Konishi) and the myth of Flynn of the Inland (David Trudinger). Sometimes, the memory of an historical event can be falsely interpreted as a myth, as I argue is the case for the 1967 Referendum to change the Australian

19 Hamilton and Shopes 2008: viii.
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constituent. Essays focus on memory and the practice of oral history as a way of learning more about Indigenous experiences in the more recent past (Lorina Barker), or of tracing the impact of visitors on the dynamics of race relations within Australia (Ann Curthoys). These themes, of myth, memory, and oral history, are all important for the creation and maintenance of identity, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Two contributors explore the ways in which engagement with Indigenous history affects their own sense of non-Indigenous identity (Vanessa Castejon and Jeni Thornley), while Kristina Everett discusses the emergence of new Indigenous identities in the Sydney region. Finally, all these themes are important in the history of the Stolen Generations, and the attempts by non-Indigenous Australians to acknowledge and reckon with that history. Isabelle Auguste, Jay Arthur and her co-curators Barbara Paulson and Troy Pickwick, and Peter Read all discuss different aspects of this continuing and complex process.

References


Passionate Histories


