

Conclusion: Living Histories, Living Stories

Inga Clendinnen, returning to Bennelong's story, found the two centuries' worth of public and popular history about him oppressive or at least distracting. She used the less common spelling 'Baneelon' (Watkin Tench's transliteration), hoping a small dose of unfamiliarity might help her 'escape the freight of banalities time has placed on the word Bennelong'.¹ Clendinnen's remark helped to crystallise my project—I was setting out to explore this very same 'freight of banalities'. The terrain turned out to be varied, exciting and confronting, as much as it was banal. Much of the popular, public, official, local, family and academic history-making I engaged with was commonplace, in the sense that it was everyday history work, but it was not predictable. The retellings of these stories were repetitive, but not stale. Cliché abounded, but it was not necessarily unimaginative. Far from being a deadweight of 'freight' carried along by history, the retellings of Bennelong's, Morrill's, and Windradyne's and William's stories seemed to help many vital conversations about the past to progress.

When I set out, I was on the alert for change; I wanted to hear the new interpretations and fresh perspectives on these old stories that I felt would flow from their retelling in changing social and political climates. Initially, characterisation of the differences between versions came more easily to me than plumbing the meanings of the many layers of continuity that had been maintained through repetition. I was most flummoxed by a story that had not changed when I expected that it would have. However, I gradually came to see that the patterns of repetition and familiarity

1 Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*, 103–04. Clendinnen's second reason for using this unusual transliteration was to remind herself and the reader about the 'complex store of social meanings stored within' Bennelong's five names, meanings which are often 'swept aside'.

told their own story. Film theorist Kara Keeling develops the idea of the 'cliché' as a repository of shared meaning with the potential for creative use. In Gilles Deleuze's account, 'cliché' is the usual human response to stimuli. When we come upon a new situation, a reflex of memory quickly supplies us with something that is familiar, something that can reconcile the new experience with 'commonsense'. Occasionally, when we reach out for a helpful memory, nothing familiar can be found. Deleuze valorised this moment, in which no cliché can be grasped and commonsense is out of reach, as a moment when original thought must occur. However, Keeling found the cliché itself full of possibility as a starting point of shared understanding, from which new meaning might be created even as common meanings are consolidated, and called this 'positive unoriginality'.² She described this kind of repetition as not simply naive or unthinking, but as an affirmation of 'commonsense'.³ For her, the pattern created by this constant activity is 'a record of a group's survival'.⁴

Critical histories, revisiting the sources, questioning accepted understandings of the past and investigating afresh the relationships of people to place have been vital in the recognition of Aboriginal dispossession and survival, and in the ongoing process of reconciling 'Australia and its Aboriginal history', as Lorenzo Veracini put it.⁵ Yet, critical history is not the only kind of history-making that can be a rallying point for change, and for ending the 'silences and denial' that are a barrier to thinking about Aboriginal people's claims to the places in which non-Indigenous Australians also live. Particularly on a local scale, a transformed 'commonsense' may also come about through the affirmative retelling of the stories with which people are already familiar

2 Keeling, *The Witches' Flight*, 14–21.

3 Meghan Morris developed this term in response to the myth that Australians are 'positively unable to originate', destined forever to feebly imitate American and European cultural innovations (citing Jessie Ackerman (1914), an American who visited Australia as an organiser for the Women's Christian Temperance Union). Morris, via an analysis of *Crocodile Dundee* (1986), transformed this supposed tendency to be 'positively unoriginal' into a capacity for 'positive unoriginality', a term intended to capture the innovation inherent in reuse and imitation, and the distinctive and assertive nature of the statements that can be made thereby. Morris, 'Tooth and Claw', 105–27.

4 Keeling, *The Witches' Flight*, 21.

5 Providing an account of the effect on the public sphere, and in legal decisions, of historians working to bring together apparent oppositions in Australian history (e.g., 'invasion' and 'settlement', 'resistance' and 'accommodation', 'genocide' and 'survival', and 'colonial' and 'contemporary' pasts), Veracini argued that this conceptual 'incorporation' of oppositions through the examination of regional and thematic histories (that are both 'critical' and 'synthetic'), has gradually ushered a basic recognition of Aboriginal pasts, presents and futures beyond debate and into public consciousness. Veracini, 'Of a "Contested Ground"', 224–39.

in the changing contexts created by critical histories and social activism, as well as law, policy and local economies. As Mark McKenna has observed, it is not enough for a new kind of history to be made and told once; rather, it is necessary to ‘retain and repeat’ histories that recognise the presence of Aboriginal people and open opportunities for dialogue in conversation after conversation.⁶

I experienced the power of repetition first-hand when I told Windradyne’s story at a forum focused on the approaching bicentenary of the ‘crossing of the Blue Mountains’, organised by Lithgow City Council in March 2011. I went with Kath Schilling, a senior colleague at the New South Wales Office of Environment and Heritage, and a Wiradjuri woman with links to the Darlington Point area of south-western New South Wales, who had been asked to run a workshop on Aboriginal histories. The day opened with a ‘welcome to country’ and many of the speakers acknowledged the traditional owners of the places they spoke about. However, the morning sessions had focused closely on the histories of Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson, the surveying of roads by Evans and Cox, and the European–Australian heritage associated with the road makers. There were a number of Wiradjuri and Gundungurra people present, but there were few openings for connecting Aboriginal histories to these discussions.

A seasoned convenor, Kath had arranged the program so that I would open the afternoon session by telling the story of Windradyne and his crossing of the Blue Mountains west to east, and of his friendship with the Suttor family, before she opened the floor to discussion. Conscious that, for the first time, I would be telling this story back to Wiradjuri people on the western side of the mountain range, I focused on telling the story of war and friendship in brief, but from as many perspectives as possible. I knew it was beside the point to analyse its meanings or to emphasise my own interpretations, but I did not fully understand my role in telling the story in that place until after I had finished. Windradyne’s story had opened

6 McKenna made recommendations for accessible, affirmative public history-making of this kind for the south-eastern corner of New South Wales, including dual naming of landscape features and the commemoration of some of the region’s important Aboriginal residents. McKenna, *Looking for Blackfellas’ Point*, 220–27. Public histories such as the City of Sydney’s ‘Barani/ Barrabugu (Yesterday/ Tomorrow)’ walking tour, and The Australian National University’s ‘Deepening Histories of Place’ project take this approach to communicating complexity with simplicity by bringing interconnected histories of place to life through innovative interpretation materials. *Barani/Barrabugu (Yesterday/ Tomorrow): Sydney’s Aboriginal Journey*; description of the ‘Deepening Histories of Place’ research project, Australian National University, Australian Centre for Indigenous History, accessed 16 June 2018, www.deepeninghistories.anu.edu.au/.

up possibilities. Kath introduced Dinawan Dyrribang and a number of other Wiradjuri and Gundungurra people to the audience, and they took the stage to talk about language and history. There was no further need to demonstrate the relevance of Aboriginal histories to the crossing of the Blue Mountains—Windradyne's story had made the connection; the Wiradjuri and Gundungurra Elders were free to talk about the cultural and historical matters most important to them. The audience of mostly non-Indigenous history enthusiasts listened with warmth, possibly aided by the inclusive space opened up by the narration of the Suttor family's friendship with Windradyne.

The reconciliation movement has given a new intensity of life to stories of Aboriginal–settler friendship as beacons of hope, 'lighting the way' to a new future.⁷ Each of these stories has been touched by the reconciliation zeitgeist, which has popularised the concept of sharing histories, and set up expectations about history's power to heal. The 'lives of stories' in this book, I think, help to demonstrate that there is no simple answer to the relationship between history and reconciliation. They illustrate how complex matters of remembering and forgetting are, and how interwoven the sharing of histories is with practices of history-making.

A fresh start in history-making is part of reconciliation rhetoric. Prime Minister Rudd, in his 'Apology to the Stolen Generations' speech in 2008, proposed a new start both in history and in history-making: 'Let us turn this page together: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, government and opposition, Commonwealth and state, and write this new chapter in our nation's story together'.⁸ The careers of the three stories retold here show an intricate relationship between fresh perspectives and old stories. As particular stories about the past, they have never been completely assimilated to the values or demands of the unfolding present. Across the 1990s and following decades, they continued to transmit a complex inheritance of genres formed and re-formed by many generations, symbols tinged with nineteenth-century ideas about race, and the flavour of ways of being friends that have faded from our social lexicon. A fresh start has not been possible, partly because the ways in which we explain the past have become part of our past too, and form part of the reservoir on which we draw to face the future. This is a strength

7 To quote the title of Johnson's book, *Lighting the Way*.

8 Rudd, 'Speech by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to the Parliament'. For a discussion of these metaphors and impulses see Hamilton, 'Memory Studies', 95–96.

as well as a limitation. The heritage embodied in historical stories will not simply comply with the desired politics of the present and future, as it is not a completely consciously chosen heritage, like the canonical 'national inheritance' John Howard would have liked all Australians to subscribe to.⁹ Rather, it is a 'commonsense' in which family, local and national concerns are combined; social, cultural and historical knowledge merges; and that is played out across local landscapes. A reconciliatory 'shared history' may be a hegemonic notion, not entirely different from a 'national inheritance', but it is also an unrealistic one; layer upon layer of smaller histories would precede and follow any such overarching narrative, slowly modifying and multiplying meaning.

Some of the history-makers featured in this book set out to prosecute an inquiry into the past, or to do so at the same time as revising the histories that have gone before; others engaged with the past to commemorate, to entertain or to invigorate political purpose. Yet, the 'stories' of Morrill, Bennelong, and Windradyne and the Suttor family have, to some extent, flowed between versions that have quite distinct aims, and measure themselves against quite different standards. Like the medium of water in Graeme Swift's novel *Waterland*, as much as human hands try to direct it into rivers, channels, sluices and dams, it cannot be completely or reliably separated; it trickles between, merges in the wet soil and will flow all together again when the banks break. Further, because they all make use of story (narrative, with its verbal images, sense of character and appetite for movement), meaning seems to leap across genres. In a sense, though all those busy with history work and storytelling have their own objectives, the story also has a life of its own. As long as it is still in the process of being told, events and their interpretation remain entangled.¹⁰

Heather Goodall called for 'open-ended' spaces in which matters of reconciliation, apology, shame and responsibility can be worked on in public. As these matters are complex and difficult to articulate, she observed that spaces of 'evocation' are acutely important.¹¹ The three stories of friendship, diplomacy and adoption examined here, and many more like them, can be understood as such open-ended spaces, in which history, understandings of landscape, public space and social relationships are negotiated and renegotiated in an ongoing way. Many local tellers

9 McKenna, 'Australian History and the Australian "National Inheritance"', 1–12.

10 Swift, *Waterland*; Nugent, *Captain Cook Was Here*, x–xi.

11 Goodall, 'Too Early Yet', 17–23.

of Morrill's story do not embrace Noel Loos's idea that they might stand together proud of a common ancestor. Yet, the storytelling of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people in the Bowen–Townsville region interacts through telling this story in a mutually recognisable way, creating opportunities for diffuse, and diverse, personal exchanges, some of which are bound to be uncomfortable, and some imbricated with the perpetuation of a social, political and economic status quo, in which the recognition of Birri-gubba shares is not secure. The stories of Windradyne and William Suttor cross paths in an enigmatic but powerful way at Windradyne's resting place, forming the foundation for an agreement about the custodianship of land, an agreement that achieves much more than simply actualising reconciliation aspirations. At the same time, though, the meaning of this space of sharing for Wiradjuri people is much more complex than an affirmation of the past goodwill between William Suttor and Windradyne. The results of negotiations at Bruce Dale are inseparable from a chequered landscape of recognition and denial, sharing and segregation across Wiradjuri country. The story of Bennelong's friendship with the colony, and its consequences, functions as a space for an ongoing popular and public dialogue about the dangers of sharing pasts and histories. As a space of 'evocation', the story accommodates multiple and changing meanings, allowing for communication across a range of scales and on literal and metaphorical planes. Bennelong's story is often about Sydney and about the recognition and understanding of Aboriginal experiences of and claims to urban space; however, it also functions as a founding parable through which the dilemmas and tensions in cross-cultural relationships are continually played out in the telling, often on a national or even transnational scale.

Narratives, characters and symbols that seem quite incompatible sit down side by side around these three stories, as on Bill Ashcroft's 'verandahs' of meaning, where postcolonial stories (all stories since the foundation of a colony) look inwards as well as outwards. Each perspective creates its own verandah that joins it with, as well as delineates it from, others.¹² It is the activity of sharing stories, and working on their meanings, that can, at times, bring people together to enact social healing, and may also highlight different desired futures. It is the activity of sharing stories that continues to lay down strata of meaning about ancestors, past events and ancient places. These three stories are part of a conversation about the past in which there will be no last word.

12 Ashcroft, 'Excess: Post Colonialism', 33–44.

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