

# Foreword

## Doug Munro: A Very Short Introduction

Tuvaluans also created a documentary record. According to one naval captain, they were such inveterate letter writers and pestered so much for stationery that his ship almost ran out of ink.<sup>1</sup>

It began with a letter postmarked Wellington, New Zealand. Fifteen years later, I count its sender among my good friends, even if we are separated by a large continent and an even larger ocean. But readers of this book may be asking, ‘Who is Doug Munro?’ and it’s a fair enough question. He is a New Zealander whose original specialisation was Pacific Islands history and who taught for nine years at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji. Although his two degrees were awarded by Australian universities (Flinders and Macquarie), and although he lived in Australia for some 20 years, he has published little on Australian history. He would be the last to describe himself as an historian of Australia. Yet, like the letter I received in 2007, he has seemingly come out of nowhere to write a wonderful book on an aspect of Australia’s History Wars.

Like the late nineteenth-century Tuvaluans, the subject of his doctoral thesis, Doug is an inveterate missive writer. Every couple of weeks, we exchange emails about the books we have read, the research projects we are trying to get across the finish line, and the absurdity of politics and politicians, both New Zealand and Canadian. Of course, our exchanges are not entirely scholarly: the occasional meme has been known to travel 15,000 kilometres from Wellington to Fredericton and vice versa, as have photographs of Belle, Doug’s much-loved Maltese Terrier, and Bruce,

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1 Doug Munro, ‘On Being a Historian of Tuvalu: Further Thoughts on Methodology and Mindset’, *History in Africa: A Journal of Debates, Methods, and Source Analysis*, vol. 26, 1999, pp. 218–36, specifically p. 225, doi.org/10.2307/3172142.

my new Labrador Retriever. Academic friendships may start with what matters most to us as scholars—books, ideas and, for historians, archival discoveries that range from the everyday to the jackpot—but they quickly move into what matters most to us as people—the comings and goings of our kids, the fortunes and misfortunes of mutual friends, our health and our partner's health.

Fifteen years ago, I was a junior scholar, insecure in my research and writing. Doug's letter, coming when it did and coming as it did, completely out of the blue, meant a lot: a senior scholar, with a lot on his plate, had taken the time to send me some material relevant to my own research. For the next couple of years, I took more than I gave, seeking his criticism, incorporating his frank advice, and needing his genuine encouragement. It's now my turn to return the favour to a fine historian, biographer and friend.

An abiding memory is wading through miles of microfilms looking for nuggets—very much like a gold miner.<sup>2</sup>

Doug's scholarship moves widely across both time and space, from the Pacific Islands in the nineteenth century to activist-historians in North America in the twentieth century, and from indentured labourers who appear as fragments in a larger archive to great historians who appear larger than life in books, articles and countless archival boxes. The Manning Clark papers alone measure a staggering 30.3 metres. At each stop, Doug immerses himself in his subject, wades through miles of material and emerges with a manuscript that invariably contains something original, or golden, either a new set of facts or a new interpretation. In a way, he reminds me a bit of Canadian historian Ramsay Cook, who once described himself as a grasshopper: because he didn't like staying in one place for extended periods of time, he jumped from one topic to the next, exploring it long enough to write an article or a book, before moving on.

In his doctoral work, completed at Macquarie University in 1983, Doug studied Tuvalu and its long encounter with European traders, missionaries and colonial officials across the nineteenth century, or in his words, its long

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<sup>2</sup> Munro, 'On Being a Historian of Tuvalu', p. 226.

encounter with ‘commerce, the cross, and the flag’.<sup>3</sup> From 1984 the focus of his research was indentured labour and unfree labour generally, although he occasionally returned to missionary activity and colonial rule. Caught up in what have been called the ‘messy entanglements’ of Pacific history, he published a remarkable run of 20-plus articles.<sup>4</sup> (Parenthetically, Doug doesn’t like the phrase ‘messy entanglements’ because it implies that the past is indecipherable when it isn’t. Personally, I like it because it speaks to the complexity and contingency of history. I suspect it’s a generational thing or a grad school thing. After all, Doug is a generation ahead of me and was trained in the Canberra-school tradition of empiricism.) In between his work on indentured labourers and Polynesian pastors, Doug co-authored a fascinating article—frankly, there is no other word for it—on the frequency and intensity of tropical storms in Tuvalu: that its findings may be helpful to the identification of ‘temporal trends and variations in low latitude tropical cyclone frequencies over the long term’ eerily anticipates the environmental historian’s imperative to understand yesterday’s weather in order to understand the impact of climate change on today’s weather.<sup>5</sup>

Even before Doug left the University of the South Pacific and returned to New Zealand in 2000, he was switching lanes and developing an interest in biography—notably his biographical work on other Pacific historians, culminating in a book on five of his compatriots, *The Ivory Tower and Beyond*.<sup>6</sup> Another research interest was suicide in twentieth-century New Zealand, by any definition an intellectually and emotionally draining subject. Historians dig where they stand and Doug stood in Wellington, giving him easy access to Archives New Zealand: using routinely generated sources—in this case, state coronial inquests—he and his Canadian co-author studied people at their lowest, who were dealing with any number of challenges, from physical and mental illness to financial difficulty, and from marital breakdown to alcohol abuse.

3 Doug Munro, ‘The Lagoon Islands: A History of Tuvalu, 1820–1908’, PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 1983, p. ii, available at: [digilib.library.usp.ac.fj/gsdll/collect/usplibr1/index/assoc/HASH01e1.dir/doc.pdf](http://digilib.library.usp.ac.fj/gsdll/collect/usplibr1/index/assoc/HASH01e1.dir/doc.pdf).

4 See Doug Munro, ‘Labour Trade Studies: What and Where?’ in Alaima Talu and Max Quanchi (eds), *Messy Entanglements: The Papers of the 10th Pacific History Association Conference, Tarawa, Kiribati*, Brisbane: Pacific History Association, 1995, pp. 131–39.

5 R.F. McLean and Doug Munro, ‘Late 19th Century Tropical Storms and Hurricanes in Tuvalu’, *South Pacific Journal of Natural Science*, vol. 11, 1991, pp. 203–19, specifically p. 216, available at: [uspaquatic.library.usp.ac.fj/gsdll/collect/spjnas/index/assoc/HASH0199.dir/doc.pdf](http://uspaquatic.library.usp.ac.fj/gsdll/collect/spjnas/index/assoc/HASH0199.dir/doc.pdf).

6 Doug Munro, *The Ivory Tower and Beyond: Participant Historians of the Pacific*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.

The end result was a series of articles on suicide in New Zealand that are both insightful and humane, that treat a difficult subject—a ‘sequence of trials and sorrows’<sup>7</sup>—with equal parts analysis and empathy.

But in the main, Doug focused his scholarly energy on the relationship between historians and historical writing in the Pacific Islands, his original stomping ground, but also in Australia, Great Britain, Canada, and the United States, with a special interest in biographies of historians and academic controversies. His output has been deep, wide and prolific: books, edited volumes, interviews and a special issue of the *Journal of Historical Biography* (2014), ‘Telling Academic Lives’. It’s also been very good, and the reviewers have been generous, even effusive. Peter Hempenstall, for example, singled out Munro’s ‘indefatigability as a researcher’, adding that the endnotes to *The Ivory Tower and Beyond* are alone ‘worth the price of admission’.<sup>8</sup>

Doug’s research may be worth the price of admission, but his writing is the show. Again, the reviewers have been kind, describing his prose as ‘clear’, ‘smooth flowing’ and even ‘elegant’.<sup>9</sup> Although he once called himself a ‘grubber with an ability to find things’ in the archives,<sup>10</sup> Doug understands that the grubbiness of research must be polished with jargon-free writing that aspires to tell a well-structured story.

Originality takes many forms.<sup>11</sup>

One form of originality is a new take on an old story, in this instance the story of Peter Ryan’s 1993 assault against the scholarship and reputation of Manning Clark, the recently deceased author of a renowned six-volume history of Australia. That an unapologetic and unrepentant Ryan had been Clark’s publisher at Melbourne University Press makes the story that

7 John C. Weaver and Doug Munro, ‘Country Living, Country Dying: Rural Suicides in New Zealand, 1900–1950’, *Journal of Social History*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2009, pp. 933–61, specifically p. 943, doi.org/10.1353/jsh.0.0186.

8 Peter Hempenstall, review of *The Ivory Tower and Beyond: Participant Historians of the Pacific*, in *Journal of the Pacific*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2013, pp. 284–86, specifically p. 285, doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2010.501703.

9 Arthur Crook, review of *J.C. Beaglehole: Public Intellectual, Critical Conscience*, in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2014, p. 145, doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12050; D.K. Fieldhouse, review of *J.C. Beaglehole: Public Intellectual, Critical Conscience*, in *Journal of Historical Biography*, vol. 12, 2012, pp. 118–20, specifically p. 119, available at: [www.ufv.ca/jhb/Volume\\_12/Volume\\_12\\_Fieldhouse.pdf](http://www.ufv.ca/jhb/Volume_12/Volume_12_Fieldhouse.pdf); Jaime Aurell, review of *Clio’s Lives: Biographies and Autobiographies of Historians*, in *Biography*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2019, pp. 421–26, specifically p. 421, doi.org/10.1353/bio.2019.0045.

10 Munro, ‘On Being a Historian of Tuvalu’, p. 227.

11 Munro, ‘On Being a Historian of Tuvalu’, p. 232.

much more complicated. Why did he, in his words, take ‘an overdue axe’ to ‘the stalk of a tall poppy’? To answer that question, Doug went to the archives in Canberra, Melbourne and Adelaide where he spent long hours in reading rooms, scurrying for answers. To call Doug an ‘archive rat’ is not an insult. It’s a compliment from one historian to another. Indeed, the research sustaining *History Wars* is remarkable, or ‘forensic’, to use Doug’s word: no stone was left unturned, no file was left unopened and no commentary was left unread. Yet why should anyone care about Ryan’s admittedly bizarre attack against his leading author and close friend? Or, as Doug asks, ‘what does a controversy that basically lasted a fortnight as a media and talkback radio event mean to us almost thirty years later?’

As the title indicates, it speaks to Australia’s ongoing History Wars, which are nasty and brutish but never short because they are fought over long stretches of time on multiple fronts: settler colonialism, reconciliation, immigration, multiculturalism, statues, holidays, museum exhibits and school curricula. Ultimately, they are fought over national identity and national symbols and that fight is visceral. For example, when a Bermagui cafe owner displayed a sign on Australia Day in 2016 saying, ‘Yes, we’re open on National Dickhead Day’, he received death threats.<sup>12</sup> And when some Australians vandalised statues of James Cook, other Australians asked: what’s wrong with celebrating the man who, in 1770, raised a flag and claimed British sovereignty over what became Australia? But Cook’s ceremony of possession—which historian Mark McKenna brilliantly called ‘nothing less than a form of sorcery’<sup>13</sup>—was also a ceremony of dispossession that marked devastating consequences for Aboriginal peoples. All of this is to say that the Ryan–Clark controversy is about more than Peter Ryan and Manning Clark. Ultimately, it’s about Australia’s national identit(ies) and conversations about national identity are necessarily fraught and never easy: Canada came within a few thousand votes of breaking up in 1995 over its identity question.

The Ryan–Clark controversy also speaks to the place of Manning Clark in Australia’s national imagination. Had Ryan taken his axe to another historian, it’s unlikely that we would be still talking about it 30 years later. But Clark wasn’t just any historian. He was the author and keeper of

12 Paul Daley, ‘Australia Day is “dickhead day”: year-long visceral backlash over chalkboard message’, *Guardian*, 25 January 2017, available at: [www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/jan/25/australia-day-is-dickhead-day-year-long-visceral-backlash-over-chalkboard-message](http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/jan/25/australia-day-is-dickhead-day-year-long-visceral-backlash-over-chalkboard-message).

13 Mark McKenna, ‘Crown’, in Melissa Harper and Richard White (eds), *Symbols of Australia*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010, pp. 30–37, specifically p. 35.

Australia's national story, however imperfect his scholarship and however blinkered that story. Few, if any, historians in the Anglo-American world have occupied the space that Clark occupied by dint of will, force of personality and felicity of pen. Canada's Donald Creighton (b.1902)? Maybe. But not even Creighton, for all his gifts, enjoyed the same prominence; when he died in 1979, he had been already written off as a caricature, as yesterday's man unable to speak either to the past or the present. Not so Manning Clark: 'In death as in life, [he] has retained the capacity to disturb and astound his fellow Australians'.<sup>14</sup>

I was reminded of Clark's tenacious and complicated place in Australia's national imagination in 2015 when Doug—along with a Canadian colleague, curiously enough—invited me to a conference on biographies of historians at ANU.<sup>15</sup> Preparing for my first trip to Australia, I made a list of novels: Patrick White's *Voss*, Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and Peter Carey's *Amnesia*. Each in its own way affected me. But I was especially struck by the history they drew on and the history they tried to make sense of. To quote William Faulkner, 'The past is never dead. In fact, it isn't even past'.<sup>16</sup>

In the opening scenes of *Amnesia*, the main character—a flawed, shambolic, down-on-his-luck journalist named Felix Moore—is finally given the boot by his long-suffering wife. Tracking him down at a local watering hole—a dive, really—she summarily presents him with a plastic bag containing, he says, 'a mobile phone, a charger, a framed photo of my daughters, and my complete signed set, all six volumes, of Manning Clark's much loved *History of Australia*'. Without a nickel to his name and his credit cards maxed out, Felix is forced to sell his 'treasured Manning Clarks' to a book dealer on Sydney's Oxford Street.<sup>17</sup> With \$200 in his pocket, he is able to move on with his life, even if things don't go according to plan.

14 Stephen Holt, *A Short History of Manning Clark*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991, p. 231.

15 See Doug Munro and John Reid (eds), *Clio's Lives: Biographies and Autobiographies of Historians*, Canberra: ANU Press, 2017, doi.org/10.22459/CL.10.2017.

16 William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, Act 1, Scene III, Vintage Books, 1951.

17 Peter Carey, *Amnesia*, London: Penguin Random House, 2014, pp. 15–17.

It's a clever literary trick: selling Clark's *History* both saves Felix in the immediate term and frees him in the medium term, allowing him to explore Australia's complicated past unburdened by the physical and symbolic weight of Clark's *History*. And that's when it dawned on me, on Manly Beach, of all places: 'Manning Clark is never dead. In fact, he isn't even Manning Clark'. He's a blank slate on which Australians, including Peter Ryan, can write what they want, making the Ryan–Clark controversy a text to be analysed and *History Wars* an important contribution to Australia's national conversation.

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**Figure 1. Caricature of Manning Clark on the front cover of *Quadrant*, September 1993.**

Source. © John Spooner (artist) and *Quadrant* 1993; reproduced with the permission of John Spooner and Keith Windschuttle, editor of *Quadrant*. Image provided by the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, NZ.





**Figure 2. Peter Ryan—drawn from life—on the front cover of *Quadrant*, October 1994.**

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