

## Preface

### On 'Exchanging histories'

Since WEH Stanner drew attention to the prevailing 'Great Australian Silence' in the late 1960s,<sup>1</sup> it has been the subject of much historical commotion. Indeed, many non-Indigenous historians have been so focussed upon revising and interpreting the Indigenous 'silences' of the official archival records that they have not heard the racket being made by Indigenous artists, performers, biographers, poets, filmmakers and even footballers and their spectators. We welcome these voices, and timely discussions of them, into *Aboriginal History*, volume 30. This volume explores issues primarily relating to non-textual modes of Aboriginal historical practice. It is inspired by our Australian Research Council Project, 'Unsettling histories: Indigenous modes of historical practice',<sup>2</sup> which aims to encourage an appreciation of Indigenous historical interpretations in a variety of formats.

This special themed volume of *Aboriginal History* also marks the thirtieth edition of the journal. In 1977, when it was first published, the dominant assumption was that there could be no Aboriginal history, only Aboriginal culture. Since then, *Aboriginal History* has been an important player in the development of a fresh genre of Australian history. The journal's editorial Board and its published content have been multi-disciplinary and wide-ranging. Embracing an inclusive definition of what constitutes 'history', historical style and methodology, *Aboriginal History* has opened new doors for scholarship. Indigenous historians have used various story-telling techniques, from spoken narratives with translations by linguists, to a focus on art, music and material evidence as historical sources. In keeping with the emphasis of the journal's early volumes, we aim to involve writers and scholars from a range of heritages and disciplinary backgrounds. We also aim to do something slightly different, by showcasing some of the richness of current engagements by Indigenous Australians, and others who work with them, in the practice of history.

Histories, identities and ideas about nation are closely intermeshed. The recent adversarial clamour labelled as the 'History Wars', where Aboriginal history topics predominated, but Aboriginal voices were lost, led some historians to defensively retreat

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1. Stanner 1968.

2. The Chief Investigators are Frances Peters-Little, Ann McGrath and Margo Neale of the National Museum of Australia. Our research project, which commenced in 2004, has initiated workshops, conferences, exhibitions, journeys, and films in Canberra, the Top End of the Northern Territory, Melbourne, Walgett, Lightning Ridge, Glengarry, Sheepyard, Broome, Kalkaringi, Sydney, Lake Mungo and the Willandra Lakes district.

to conservative formats and source options. This threatens to narrow, or at least contain, the parameters of acceptable 'history'. For example, some recent Australian debates about nation and national values have attempted to reinstall British-centred arrival narratives, for example in the Report of the Review of the National Museum of Australia.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, it has been difficult to ignore Indigenous history as a founding element of Australian nationhood. The importance of Aboriginal history was finally judged an essential element of the national story in the government-led 2006 History Summit.<sup>4</sup>

'National values' are passed on not only in formal history texts, but also via entertainments, music, film, sport and many other experiences. A nation which seeks to share values in common requires a nation which can look beyond a 'war' about history, evocative of conquest, and can seek to exchange histories according to collaborative models that allow for differences of perspective and opinion. These histories are not restricted to remote, rural or to urban regions, although they may relate to particular lands. For such exchanges to occur, we need to hear the histories being told in diverse formats, concerned with everything from how we tell the stories of early British contact at Port Jackson to how we explain rugby, and how younger generations learn history through hip hop.

As contributor Tony Birch reminds us in this volume, Indigenous people are often depicted as holding to mythology based in a timeless culture existing outside history. To the extent that their history-related practices are seen as a form of history at all, these have been classed as 'oral history'. When collected by academic historians, Aboriginal 'oral histories' have been transformed quickly into 'usable texts'. Albeit of great value in preserving Indigenous voices, and despite concerted attempts to reduce this impact<sup>5</sup> when spoken words are rendered into written formats, western historians reinforce a type-faced, disembodied frame for history. Such history-collectors thus *heard* much better than they saw, their records missing the multi-sensory nature of Indigenous history telling. But other ways of representing these multiple dimensions exist.

Fitting non-text based forms of historicity within the constraints of an academic, refereed journal presents challenges. Rather than playing the music or screening the film or art, these forms inevitably have to be translated into text or pixels on a small page. However, working constructively within these constraints, we consider that this journal has a strong role to play in holding a mirror to these growing areas in the field, and in charting the directions that they take. When we were commissioning the articles for the volume, we were asked how we would maintain refereeing standards if the contributions were atypical. As there are ever increasing numbers of people critically engaged with opening up the ways of telling and receiving histories, this was never a difficulty.

It is also significant that modes of publication are undergoing rapid transformation as digital and on-line publication capacities expand and become widely available. They have the potential to augment the scope of standard publication formats and to

3. John Carroll et al 2003. For example, see pp 18-19, 22-24.

4. The Australian History Summit, Transcript of Proceedings, 17 August 2006. See also Communique and Background Papers.

5. See for example Donaldson 1979; Muecke et al 1985; Rose 1989.

make publication increasingly flexible and diverse. Digital forms of publication may eventually catch up with the flexibility and diversity required to adequately express Indigenous forms of history. Before the fortieth edition of the journal comes out, we hope to see the journal's records, discussions and explorations of histories carried out not only in their currently flourishing textual forms, but in interactive maps, on-line videos and sound files of song.

In this volume, Kim Mahood's 'Mapping outside the square' project represents understandings of Mulan/Lake Gregory in a multi-layered canvas format that maps people's relationships to place (p 13-28). Land is a 'dynamic repository of hidden histories, a gift to the future in which we are all implicated' (p 10). While she points out the Walmajarri elders' insistence on the 'right people speaking for country', they want their material to be recorded urgently, so will use outside facilitators (p 11). They are keenly aware that their children no longer learn the country 'by travelling through it and absorbing its detail through the repetitions of story and physical encounter' (p 11). Françoise Dussart's reflections on the acrylic art movement at Yuendumu also explore changing artist-audience relationships and conflicting inter-generational priorities. Educational and ceremonial motivations have been redefined over time so that art production is decreasingly about ritual prestige, kin hierarchies or outsider's expectations. Although using contrasting styles and motifs, Torres Strait Islander artist Janice Peacock's work is also concerned with narrating historical continuity, change and identity. While drawing on traditional knowledge, including craft practices and forms, her work explicitly reinterprets and refutes European readings of her culture.

While more recent studies of memory, memorialisation, place, space and monuments have reflected upon different ways of experiencing, performing and recreating history, the written word constantly informs and imbricates all such practices. Penny van Toorn's recent book, *Writing never arrives naked*<sup>6</sup> considers earlier Aboriginal engagements with texts and writing, reminding us how this subject's neglect may have reinforced the notion of Aboriginal people as primitive, unchanging practitioners of the non-textual. The editors of this volume are not making a claim that text is irrelevant, but rather, we argue that other mediums and formats can complement, inform and extend words on paper. In her article, Maria Nugent advises readers to scrutinise texts anew in order to look and listen to 'the figure of the Aboriginal eye-witness' to history. There is 'much to learn about how Aboriginal people themselves variously engaged with colonial forms of commemoration and with colonial historical narratives' (p 45). While the Aboriginal eye-witness is both evidence and product of colonial historical practices, this figure 'can tell us something about Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal forms of history-making in the colonial period, and the nature of their relationship to each other' (p 45).

Imagining the visions of a range of different witnesses, Tony Birch depicts the authoritative uses of writing. In staging contrasting voices from 'Archive Box No. 4', his 'Testimony' satirises the 'Archive House of the Nation'. The 'Half-Caste Agitator' states: 'I could take up a white man's suit of clothing and a bible, but I prefer the power of writing' (p 31). The 'Duty Constable' concludes: 'If this man continues in his attempts

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6. van Toorn 2006.

to use the English language against our generosity then surely it must be taken from him.' History thus becomes another form of coloniser 'benevolence', as we hear from the 'Director of Surveillance Committee':

The future availability of the material contained within the Archive will be restricted to just one person. He will come to us at a time in the future. He will be known as 'the Professional Historian' or 'The Sophisticated One'. 'It will be the duty of the Professional Historian to wage a war, a 'History War', in defence of the defenceless – the Aborigine – who knows nothing of 'history' beyond myths and legends. When 'The Sophisticated One' cometh, praise him. (p 32)

The view that indigenous histories can be held 'hostage' by whites within the academy must continue to be challenged, for, as American author Peter Nabokov wrote, 'Thinking about ... the historical discourses of non-Western societies is too important to be left to historians alone'.<sup>7</sup> Poet June Perkins also reclaims the western archive as part of an Indigenous space. Like Mahood, she simultaneously envisages an archive of land and performance. In the dancing/fishing rhythms of her poem, she refers to 'Reeling in the sites of her aunties' significances.' In what could be layers of geomorphic time, she evokes how history is sung and painted in galleries, libraries and landscapes:

She danced the revisions of her story  
In layers upon layers  
Of the red earth  
Yellow earth, brown earth and white clay. (p 67)

Visual evidence, including photographs, films and exhibitions, are also deployed in Indigenous story telling and other historical analyses. Sylvia Kleinert's essay sensitively examines the photographic image of the 1940 wedding of Susie Murray and George Patten, featured on this volume's cover. Kleinert discusses how this image can be read in a particular historical context and can be understood in relation to constructions of a metropolitan cultural identity that have been self-produced to reflect the participants' own identity and modern mores. Heather Goodall's article shows how officially-generated photographic images have, over the decades, created an archive that Aboriginal descendents are now recovering and interpreting as a meaningful history about Aboriginal 'mates' and families living in the north-west of New South Wales. Against the backdrop of changing government policies, a highly stimulating essay by Faye Ginsberg and Fred Myers talks about the escalating role of Indigenous artists and filmmakers and the impact they are having on the way Australia's history has been represented through film and television.

In the spirit of contemporary Aboriginal song-writing and performance, articles about Aboriginal hip hop by Tony Mitchell and an interview by Theresa Davis with the Stiff Gins, could not be more musically different. Yet both essays unmistakably share the message that contemporary Aboriginal musicians conscientiously perform their work with the intention of retaining and relaying Aboriginal oral history, language and storytelling through melody and drama.

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<sup>7</sup>. Nabokov 2002: vi.

Another popular Indigenous mode of history is autobiography. While this volume cannot explore this major theme fully, Tim Rowse's invigorating essay 'Public occasions, Indigenous selves: three Ngarrindjeri autobiographies' enables us to share in the written/edited and spoken/transcribed/edited modes of Aboriginal historical storytelling through the autobiographies of Doris Kartinyeri, Veronica Brodie and Dulcie Wilson.

It is also appropriate that this volume sees the introduction of an expanded Review section that includes films, exhibitions and other genres beyond the book review. Melinda Hinkson's thoughtful review considers the 'Our Community' photographic exhibition and documentary film staged at the National Museum of Australia as part of the 'Unsettling Histories' project. On the topic of Indigenous filmmaking, Sylvia Lawson's review article looks at the film *Yellow Fella* made by Kamilaroi filmmaker Ivan Sen. On another note, John Docker's review of the film *King Kong* laments the ongoing influence of earlier scientific racism and paranoia concerning black sexuality.

The 'Great Australian Silence' is now a fiction. As Faye Gale and Fred Myers write (p 97):

Beginning in the 1960s, from all parts of Indigenous Australia, urban and remote, people began talking back in the idioms available to them, from traditional bark paintings, to political performances intended for local audiences, as well as national radio, television, and cinema. They have been raiding the colonial archive, using their own creative work to resignify these documents and images that once naturalised ethnocidal projects, while also recuperating Aboriginal history for Indigenous people and all Australians.

Inability to recognise the oral, visual, performative and autobiographical storytelling mode of Indigenous histories, on their own terms, is to deny Indigenous Australians their place in Australia's future. This volume thus reflects wide-ranging historical practices both in and outside the archives, especially those visual, performative and other embodied practices of history- and memory-making by Indigenous Australians.

The co-editors would like to thank the Board of Aboriginal History for supporting the idea of a themed thirtieth edition of the journal. They recognised that this particular theme of 'Exchanging histories' was a highly appropriate one, marking as it does both continuities in the aims of the journal and the developments in the discipline over three decades. We also wish to thank the contributing authors for responding with interest and creativity to the volume's theme. The many referees are thanked for their indispensable contributions, as are Angela Philp for her invaluable editorial assistance, Tikka Wilson for her skilful typesetting, Geoff Hunt for his copy editing of these variously textured papers and Dick Barwick for producing his thirtieth cover for the journal.

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Frances Peters-Little,  
Ann McGrath,  
Ingereth Macfarlane  
Australian Centre for Indigenous History  
Australian National University, Canberra