

Talking About History: A Case for Oral Historiography

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When John Howard lost the Australian federal election in 2007, a number of politicians and commentators predicted the end of the 'history wars'. Launching Thomas Keneally's first volume of Australian history, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd felt his new government could offer a more synthetic and conciliatory historical approach: 'I believe the time has now come to move beyond the arid intellectual debates of the history wars and the culture wars of recent years', he said. 'Time to leave behind us the polarisation that began to infect every discussion of our nation's past.'¹ Political scientist Robert Manne also thought Howard's dismissal marked a move away from the fractured public contest over Australian history: 'With the election of the Rudd Government ... The culture war will come

Public History Review
Vol 17 (2010): 62–76
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abruptly to an end', he considered. 'Without a friendly government receptive to its bilious views, the right-wing commentariat will lose most of its cultural clout.'²

The extent to which that prediction played out is not clear-cut. Certainly, history no longer seems to be such a potent weapon in public and political debate. Unlike the 2007 election, for example, Australian history played no visible part in the 2010 campaign.³ The ongoing public brawls over the past, so prominent during the Howard government's twelve years in office, have abated.⁴ Without tacit government support, there is little momentum for such a contest. That doesn't mean debate has disappeared, however. To use a syllabus truism, we seem to be dealing with degrees of 'continuity and change' in the so-called history wars, rather than an ending of hostilities altogether.

I use this curriculum discourse pointedly, because history education is one critical site of debate still playing out today. History may not generate such frenzy these days, but there is still significant disagreement – and the release in 2010 of the draft national history curriculum caused a surge of spirited public discussion. Similarly, Kevin Rudd's national apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008 sparked yet another round of often uneasy historical reflection. And in 2009, the Australian of the Year, Mick Dodson, controversially questioned whether Australia Day should be celebrated at all.

So the public conjecture over Australian history is far from over – as these debates among historians, politicians and public commentators remind us. The question is, does any of this resonate beyond the limited public sphere in which it plays out? What *do* Australians think of their history in light of the history wars? By way of answer, this paper examines the enduring public contest over the past and then investigates more elusive, but no less significant, everyday conversations about Australian history around the country. By proposing a method of 'oral historiography' to gauge contemporary historical understandings in Australia, it brings a critical new perspective to these ongoing debates.

A PERSISTENT HISTORICAL DEBATE

The 2010 release of the draft National Curriculum documents for years K-10 and senior years 11-12 confirmed Australia's anxious engagement with its history. Despite Kevin Rudd's prior insistence

that divisive historical debate should itself be a thing of the past, the curriculum has been a flash point for political and public discussion. Upon its release, then Education Minister Julia Gillard insisted the document was ‘neither black armband nor white blindfold’.⁵ Like Rudd, she attempted to preemptively evacuate any controversy from the public discussion about the new history curriculum.

Some commentators felt otherwise. The educationist Kevin Donnelly wrote a characteristically blanket rejection: ‘schools across Australia will soon be forced to teach a new-age and politically correct view of history and Australia’s place in the world’, he warned. ‘History, like every other subject in the national curriculum, has to be taught through the politically correct prism of Aboriginal, Asian and environmental perspectives.’⁶

The Australian Family Association spokesman Bill Meuhlenberg was just as concerned, saying that the curriculum ‘looks like it has been influenced by a Marxist view of history, which is worrying. We need to be objective, fair and even handed when dealing with young minds.’⁷ The Shadow Education Minister Christopher Pyne also objected to a supposed bias in the document. ‘We have a seeming over-emphasis on indigenous culture and history and almost an entire blotting out of our British traditions and ... heritage’, he lamented. ‘I am deeply concerned that Australian students will be taught a particular black armband view of our history without any counterbalancing.’⁸

Such rhetoric is predictable enough, if slightly alarmist, and could come from any outbreak of historical debate over the last fifteen years. Despite the Rudd Government’s denial that history was being politicised in the draft curriculum, it was proving to be yet another site of heated political discussion. The collective pronouns are the giveaway here, for one of the perennial paradoxes of the history wars is its rhetoric: appealing to unity and collective national identity on the one hand, those markers (‘Australian students’, ‘our history’, ‘young minds’) belie a divisive and polarising ‘semantic war’ on the other.⁹

Much has been written about the urgent, anxious language of the history wars as they play out around the world. Such work confirms just how politically contested the past has become in recent years, as the polarising language of their battlefield metaphors (‘history wars’, ‘killing of history’, and so on) are repeated in perpetual historical crises around the world.¹⁰ Students who don’t understand ‘our

history', citizens who fail to remember 'our nation's story', and museums that push 'political correctness' over pride comprise the standard headlines of these international history wars.¹¹

Reaction to these debates is not all so polemical, however. Defending the national curriculum earlier this year, the conservative historian John Hirst refused to side with criticism over the draft's treatment of Indigenous history: 'Students sometimes have had far too much Aboriginal history and that can be a bit of a turn-off', he admitted. 'But now, under the new curriculum, they're encouraged to compare the history of settler conflict in Australia with the settler conflict and the struggle over Indigenous rights in another country.'¹² Stuart Macintyre, who oversaw the development of the history stream of the draft curriculum, also dismissed Christopher Pyne's complaint. 'I think anybody who looks at the curriculum online will have great difficulty in finding any armbands', he said.¹³ Instead, his misgivings about the curriculum process included the level of consultation during its development and the support that would be given to teacher training and professional development upon its release.¹⁴

Macintyre's concerns precipitated a significant discussion among history teachers and curriculum officials about teachability of the draft.¹⁵ This professional historical discourse has engaged with questions of historical practice, relevance, and pedagogy,¹⁶ and as such, it provides an important counterpoint to the narrow partisanism of the history wars. Because it has been mostly conducted by teachers and historians in academic and professional journals, conferences, and departmental tearooms, however, this discussion has little resonance beyond the professional context in which it takes place. Consequently, the conversation over the draft curriculum that emerged here – concerning the discipline of history – was largely overshadowed by the public debate surrounding the draft curriculum's release.

So despite the incoming Labor government's hopeful plea for a more open and accommodating discussion of Australian history, the political potency of the nation's past has far from abated. I even wonder if this discourse of historical division is now firmer than ever, if *any* public venture into 'Australia's story' is automatically catalogued in the spectrum of the history wars.

That catalogue seems to grow every year. For example, support for the national apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008 was overwhelming, and Prime Minister Rudd was determined to introduce the apology into federal parliament as a unifying and bipartisan act of respect. Yet there was considerable public and political disagreement over the merits of the apology as well as the history that motivated it.¹⁷ In January 2009, when Mick Dodson was made Australian of the Year, his qualified acceptance speech generated considerable media attention and political comment. Dodson's call for Australia Day to be shifted out of respect to Indigenous Australians was backed by the *Melbourne Age*;¹⁸ in the *Australian*, meanwhile, the columnist Janet Albrechtson dismissed the suggestion: 'Dodson's award does not honour Australia Day – it diminishes it. Dodson may not like *our history*, but he cannot change it.'¹⁹

Again and again, this loaded discourse of national history – 'our history' – confirms how politically contested collective memory and national identity are. Like other famous rhetorical collectives – such as the mainstream, the battlers, the silent majority – such language demonstrate history's potency in political debate.²⁰ Thus, the language that unifies has the corresponding potential to polarise and divide, as the sociologist Mirca Madianou has noted.²¹ Madianou's reading of the rhetorical slippage between 'us' and 'them' reminds me of John Howard's election slogan from 1996, 'For All of Us'. Like so much of the language that dominates the history wars, Howard's 'All of Us' represented a vague collective Australian identity. It also became an astute conservative slogan playing off racial disharmony for political gain; as Noel Pearson contended, it implied an Australia 'For All of Us (but not them)'.²²

I should add here that while conservative politicians and commentators have tended to dominate public debates over Australian history in the media, this contest is by no means one-sided. New South Wales Labor Premier Bob Carr was active in pushing a compulsory Australian history syllabus in years 9 and 10 in the 1990s, which generated significant reaction from teachers and historians. And Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating's repeated taunts of conservative Australian history fuelled angry reactions from his conservative successor, John Howard.²³

What's clear from these debates is just how politically contested national history is. In a sense, we're talking about the politics of

collective memory here: this is why national history is so contested, after all. Because so many identify with the nation, and because political parties play off its story for political legitimacy, the relationship between politics and history is a particularly powerful one. As Stefan Berger has noted, 'National history writing has been serving national politics everywhere. As long as the nation-state remains an important political reference point, national histories will continue to loom large in historical writing.'²⁴ While international scholarship has increasingly engaged with these issues of the politics of national history, there is little research on how this contested public memory operates privately. To what extent do these debates seep into private consciousnesses, conversations and identities? Do the history wars exist beyond the headlines?

A CASE FOR ORAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

To gauge Australian history's relevance beyond the headlines we simply need to ask. To that end, the second part of this paper hinges on this question: if the history wars are fought over the mainstream, what does the mainstream really think? (I for one find it troubling that the history wars' collective rhetoric fails to include the very people it fights over.)

This venture into everyday attitudes to Australian history is based on a research project called *Whose Australia? Popular Understandings of the Nation*.²⁵ Until recently, I had always considered this to be an oral history project, based as it is on interviews with people from around Australia about the nation's history. But I think its method could more accurately be termed *oral historiography*, for the way it examines the impact of public historical debate on ordinary Australians; this project does not investigate individual's perspectives on *what happened*, but on the discipline of *history*.

My own scholarly desire to get in touch with the ordinary is hardly new. I'm thinking particularly here of Judith Brett and Anthony Moran's excellent long-term qualitative study, *Ordinary People's Politics*, which traced the political beliefs and engagement of several Australians over many years.²⁶ Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton's *Australians and the Past* project has also been an influential model for this study. Their interviews with hundreds of people compiled for the first time a sense of everyday historical consciousness from around Australia.²⁷

So what is oral historiography? I have found it used only once in any widely cited work – by David Henige, in his survey of the varied practices of oral history.²⁸ For the purposes of this research, however, I use the term as a method of analysis that employs techniques of oral history, focus group work and qualitative research to examine how different historical views are understood in the community. It asks how people engage with different historical readings (historiography) day to day.

Oral historiography reflects my interest in concepts of historical understanding and historical literacy, as well as a desire to investigate historiography *beyond* the conventional sphere of public debate. Rather than canvassing questions about people's political engagement or historical interest, this research considers their intersection: how do people engage with Australian history in the context of the very polarising debates over the past? The *Whose Australia?* project aims to populate these public and political discussions about national history with the voices of ordinary people from around the country.

Six communities have been chosen to conduct this qualitative study (the suburbs of Marrickville and Mosman in Sydney, St Albans in outer western Melbourne, Rockhampton in Central Queensland, Bega in southern New South Wales and Derby in Western Australia's Kimberley). Both individuals and focus groups will be interviewed for the project, and on the whole, they will be approached through community organisations such as seniors' centres, education institutions such as universities and TAFEs, as well as migrant resource centres, youth groups and so on.

This approach has its limitations, of course – the major one being how to get marginal and disenfranchised voices to take part in a project that uses community groups to contact potential respondents. Since the aim is to visit people in their own communities and record their conversations about Australian history, however, approaching community organisations seems to be a logical way to get an entrance into these conversations.²⁹ To date, the project has interviewed forty people, individually and in groups, in the two communities of St Albans and Rockhampton – and the second part of this paper provides some initial thoughts and interim findings on those visits.

As the national curriculum and national apology were generating considerable debate in the media and in politics, I began asking people about their thoughts on Australian history. They offer some

predictable and some surprising results: the participants were highly cynical of politicians and the media, and they felt alienated from more formal discourses of Australian history – such as those textbook narratives they remembered from school.³⁰ But they were also certain of how important Australian history is to know.

A group of students at Victoria University reeled off horror stories about their formal experiences learning about Australian history, yet insisted on its significance nonetheless:

Interviewer: I was interested that none of you found Australian history particularly interesting – either because it's been badly taught, or it's too young, or it's too boring. Do you think that it's important to know about it?

Manisha: Oh I think it is important.

Silvie: Oh, definitely.

Selena: Very important.

Manisha: I think it's only now that I'm starting to realise that, yeah, I do need to know more about Australia, especially learning world history. And yeah, it is a small part of it – the history isn't as large as other histories, really – but it is important, because that's where we live and after our studies, that's where we're going to be working – you know, in Australian communities. So we need to know where all these and things like that came from.

The participants felt as if they had been *exposed* to an official Australian narrative, but that narrative doesn't really speak to their own experiences. This rejection of the realities of school history, while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of Australian history at an abstract level, is certainly shared by countless schoolchildren around the country.³¹ Yet this isn't simply an issue about school history. When I asked Jarred, a student teacher from Rockhampton, how connected he felt to Australia's past, he answered with similarly considered reluctance: 'Um, I guess I have to be. I don't *feel* it, but I have to be because I was born and raised here. So I am part of it, whether I like it or not. I haven't got a choice, so yeah.' In their interviews, respondents generally failed to connect at all with a formal national narrative – what we might call 'history from above'.

Such attitudes were also strongly represented in the *Australians and the Past* project, as well as the influential study it was modeled on in the US conducted by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen. The authors of those studies noted that this reluctance to engage with that formal national story contrasted markedly with the recent boom in heritage studies, genealogy and family histories: people were actively interested in 'the past', but didn't consider themselves particularly interested in 'history'.³² These results have been mirrored in my own interviews, where participants talked about connecting to their family stories and local histories of place, in contrast to that lack of engagement with Australian history I mentioned previously.

Less obviously, and more critically, respondents were deeply aware of history's subjectivity. And it's this awareness, this willingness to engage with history's complexity, that has implications for the way Australian history is spoken about and presented in those political debates over the past. Of the forty people I have spoken with so far, for example, only two had actually heard of the history wars, but they overwhelmingly understood *why* history is so contentious.

Nastassia was working at a youth Centre in St Albans, and I asked her why people disagree about history:

Maybe everyone lived it differently, and comes out with different perspectives on how it happened and stuff. Like there's that Bishop guy who believes the Holocaust didn't happen – I don't know how! Anyway, yeah, I suppose everyone just lives it differently. Like, I suppose if you look at, like, the Australian one with whether it was settlement or invasion, that would depend on which side of the boat you were on, or which side you associate with more closely or something.

Said Ray, an elderly Australian from St Albans:

Well I could think of a number of glaring examples ... I mean, we read about the Second World War, where our Australian fellows with the Japanese who served – I know fellows who served on the Burma railway, and they say 'war is war', you know. And they were sort of able to live with the fact that the Japanese did what they *thought* was right, but it was very, very harsh. But you get the other side who find that the mention of Japan almost is very, very devastating for them. And I can understand that too.

Here, Ray offers a considered, thoughtful explanation about historical disagreement, which draws on a degree of historical knowledge and experience that may not be typical. Nevertheless, his appreciation of historical perspective was shared by many participants. When Sylvie from Victoria University was asked why she thought people disagreed about the past, she described how historical engagement is so culturally bound and subjective: 'Well you filter everything through your own culture', she said. 'So of course, wherever you're from in the world, you have a strong identity to that particular culture. So the way that you interpret history has to be filtered through some type of cultural form.' 'There's always going to be two sides to it, not just the one', added Tony, another student from Victoria University. 'So that's why people will get so unhappy about the way, like, history's being taught in schools or something.'

Dorothy was a world (and few generations!) away from Sylvie and Tony in her group at the Rockhampton Country Women's Association. But she framed her response in similar terms to explain how disagreements over the past develop:

Yeah, no, but I mean you'd have two people, and this person would tell their side of the story, that person would tell *their* side of the story. So you've got two versions, and then every time it's repeated...

Looking at these quotes, it isn't hard to discern an emergent historical comprehension and analysis. The language may not be sophisticated, but the general ideas point to an understanding of history that is quite complex – these respondents aren't just talking about the past, they're talking about *history*. Such responses reveal quite a high level of what could be called a proto or popular 'historical consciousness', which includes an ability to critically engage with the past and understand different points of view.³³ Obviously, this doesn't equate to a professional critical competency – that developed 'historical literacy' we might expect from our students and colleagues. And it certainly doesn't mean that everyone around Australia feels the same about the national story. But this broad capacity for historical empathy, critique and complex understanding evident in the interviews is significant nonetheless.

While these are interim results at best, I'm nevertheless interested in how they point to what I would call a basic historical literacy

among ordinary Australians, where the truth about the nation's history isn't at all settled among the public. This has interesting implications not only for history teaching, but those public debates about the subject: it overturns the myth that there is one historical version we should be teaching; and it challenges a core assumption of the history wars, which implies some sort of contest between competing versions that we need to choose from.

These results also throw up some interesting questions about the required skills of historical understanding. There has been significant international research into the components of historical literacy or historical thinking. This work, advanced by history educationists internationally, has seen skills such as historical empathy and critical analysis of source material broken down into discrete stages of development.³⁴ A recent report by the Australian Historical Association also investigated the different levels of historical thinking among Australian university students and confirmed that these skills are not simply intuitive, but must be built and reinforced over time.³⁵

While it may be true that a refined historical thinking is not represented across the community, my results indicate a widespread capacity for critique and complex historical understanding that warrants attention. Jarrod, a student science teacher from Rockhampton, struggled to be interested in history at all simply because it cannot be pinned down: 'Well it's hard to prove history, isn't it? A lot of it is a theory put into words, I guess, because you're not there. So you can only extrapolate.' His frustration with history's complexity may have been a turn-off personally, but it simultaneously revealed a relatively developed understanding about the difficult nature of the discipline.

I cannot pretend that participants were untroubled by the very subjectivity they were describing. Some within the one interview, even, recognised that historical interpretation is invariably partial, while also insisting on the importance of finding a 'truth' or 'balance' to overcome the rigid polarisation of the history wars. But their essential views of history's subjectivity are a striking counterpoint to the shallow partisanism of the history wars. A group at the Rockhampton Historical Society were even keen to point that out themselves:

Interviewer: How did people feel last year when Prime Minister Rudd apologised to the Stolen Generations?

Jan: I thought it was wonderful.

James: Long overdue.

Isabel: It was just symbolism as far as I'm concerned. It did nothing.

Margaret: I think so too, really.

Isabel: It made Kevin Rudd popular.

James: It was a start though. It was a start. It's got to start somewhere.

Isabel: It didn't do anything.

Libby: I was very moved by it, moved by his speech, yes. Much overdue.

Fay: I felt very pleased that someone did get up and say something. Yes, very pleased.

Interviewer: It's interesting that even within this group we have some disagreement over this.

Isabel: This is the 'history wars!'

The problem with the way the history wars have played out is that its dualism simply cannot accommodate the reality that people disagree about the past every day, over any number of topics, and in any number of ways; moreover, their everyday conversations do not seem to register in public debate. The fact that only two out of forty had even heard of the history wars suggests it has been conducted by a select few, for a select few. In other words, although these debates are populist, they aren't well populated by any means. Ultimately, I am hopeful that this venture into oral historiography gives ordinary people a chance to contribute to national discussions about Australian history; moreover, there's a real potential in that effort to challenge some of the more simplistic and troubling assumptions of the history wars.

Endnotes

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- ¹⁴ Justine Ferrari, 'Historian slams school course', *The Australian*, 25 May 2010, p5.
- ¹⁵ Anna Patty, 'Battle looms over cuts to history education', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 March 2010, p7. See also Dan Harrison, 'Fears new history course too ambitious', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 March 2010, p5, where the President of the History Teachers' Association of Australia, Paul Kiem, insisted on the importance of teacher training: 'It is a subject where so much depends on the passion and expertise of the teacher. If a teacher is not a passionate expert, there is the danger that any teaching of a mandatory subject will be counter-productive.'
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