

## Forum

### In Defence of Paul Ham: History as Its Own Worst Enemy

*Bodie A. Ashton, The University of Adelaide*

Journalist-cum-popular historian Paul Ham's bad-tempered 2014 attack on the historical discipline within the academy seems to be a very unusual place for a member of that academy to try and find some common ground. Ham was responding to a review by the University of Queensland's Martin Crotty, of his book *1914: The Year the World Ended*. Crotty's review was, perhaps, much more even-handed than Ham might have expected — he did not, for example, point out the silly melodrama of the title — but nevertheless, there was certainly a sense that the academic was typing his thoughts with a wry smile and perhaps a disbelieving shake of the head. Ham, after all, claimed that the trenches on the Western Front could be seen from space by 1915. Who, Crotty wondered, quite reasonably, was watching from orbit? *1914* was essentially a 'Boys' Own adventure', and it would not pass muster among serious academics.<sup>1</sup> However, Crotty was careful to throw a bone to the

---

<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps a little questionable, as the academy has produced some woeful potboilers in the past, and not a few of them on the topic of the First World War. The reader is directed to Niall Ferguson's *The Pity of War* for an example of faulty research, argument and logic.

author; it had to be remembered, after all, that *1914* had not been written for ‘serious’ historians to read. Rather, it was a popular history to be read by an interested public. In this regard, Crotty’s ultimate judgement was that Ham had done a fine job.

Crotty’s review was well considered, and while it was not entirely complimentary, its criticisms were grounded in very real issues with the book. Ham’s response in the pages of *The Age* was neither measured nor even-handed. Without referring to the review (though the subtext was clear), Ham castigated academic historians for having their heads in the clouds (or somewhere more unpleasant). Academics do not write to be read, he charged. They are terrified of readership, and they revel in their irrelevance. Their prose is turgid and they are a humorless bunch. Historians to be emulated were people like Thucydides, Procopius and Gibbon. To that pantheon, assumedly, we should add ‘Ham’.

Ham’s argument was petty, the product of sour grapes. But what if he was correct? Naturally, I do not mean to imply that Ham is a modern Edward Gibbon, and I maintain that Crotty was not unfair in his critique. Indeed, not long after *1914* was published, I was present at a plenary session of the Adelaide Writers Week, in which Ham shared a stage with Sean McMeekin and Margaret MacMillan. Ham’s inability to match wits with his counterparts was breathtaking — as was his, frankly, ludicrous suggestion, among others, that the reason the First World War went for as long as it did was due to the ‘divine right of kings’. Presumably, he should have been reminded that

the ‘year the world ended’ was 1914, and not 1414. But Ham may well have stumbled upon a significant problem within the profession, one that is driving interested readers away from scholars and into the waiting arms of former journalists such as Ham, Paul Daley and Peter FitzSimons — writers who have little training or faculty in the historical discipline, but who nonetheless frequently top domestic bestsellers’ lists. Maybe it is true that academic historians are too snooty for their own good. Maybe our image is of boorish, stuffy, out-of-touch, tweed-jacketed Poindexters. If that is the case, then perhaps we only have ourselves to blame.

History is a funny sort of discipline. On the one hand, history belongs to everyone. We like to engage, to interest and immerse readers and audiences in the past. The success of historians’ sessions at the various Australian writers’ festivals bears witness to this, as do marvelous initiatives like History SA’s State History Week or the Historian in Residence programme. Sciences might well be the modern monastic orders, the sacred teachings protected and interpreted only by the learned acolytes and high priestesses, but history, with its emphasis on commonality of experience and communal ownership of the past, might be the great academic bastion of true socialism.

Lenin’s problem with doctrinaire socialism (among other things) was that collective revolutionary fervour tends to lose its impetus eventually. As a result, he emphasized the need for a ‘revolutionary vanguard’ to act as the proxy will of the people.

Mensheviks would claim that this was a perversion of Marxism, but Lenin did have a point, insofar that the Revolution would not have succeeded without a small, tight-knit, devoted core of political revolutionaries. The same might also be said for the historical fraternity; while public ownership of history *sounds* like an excellent idea in theory, in reality, historical study is complex and difficult. There is a need to understand sources *and* analysis *and* interpretation. Lenin had the Bolsheviks. We have the university historians.

And sometimes, the discipline seems to channel this sort of character — or, more accurately, channel the character of Brezhnev’s grey, colourless, grim Soviet Union. If the most notable problem of ‘the people’s profession’ is that it has become inaccessible to ‘the people’, then at least, in part, it is because historians themselves have erected an insurmountable iron curtain, behind which stands the proverbial ivory tower. One prominent example, in this country at least, is a group based in Canberra, known as ‘Honest History’. Headed by the University of New South Wales’ Professor Peter Stanley, Honest History insists that its aim is to provide fair, balanced and evidence-based insight to Australian historical discourse; its byline, ‘neither rosy glow nor black armband...just honest’, demonstrates the group’s self-appointed role as custodians of Australian history. The group portrays itself as crusaders for truth in the face of intractable political pressure to evangelise Australia’s historical ‘goodness’; its focus, perhaps unsurprisingly, has been the Anzac legend, and it even has a

section on its website entitled ‘Centenary Watch’, in which the Honest Historians ‘keep track’ of the public discourse surrounding the hundredth anniversary of the First World War in general, and Anzac Day in particular.

In and of themselves, the aims of Honest History are hardly objectionable. Certainly, there is something disturbing about the fetishisation of war, and Australia has been guilty of it in the past. In many cases, historians questioning this approach have been eviscerated by reactionary commentators. When Robin Prior’s *Gallipoli: The End of the Myth* made its bold and well-founded claim that the Dardanelles campaign was doomed from the outset, *Quadrant*’s Mervyn F. Bendle denounced the book’s author as being ‘arrogant’, ‘fatuous’, indulging in ‘fundamental nihilism’ and ‘revel[ing] in being a bearer of ashes’. Stanley himself has been subjected to parochial and unreasonable character assassination when he dared to publicly question the myth that Australia was under a real, existential threat of invasion by the Japanese in 1942; his critics, concerned far less with historical truth and far more with vitriol, took issue with his refusal to enshrine the Kokoda Track as the arena of Australia’s salvation, and lambasted his supposed lack of patriotism.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the interminable number of Anzac miniseries, documentaries, books and public shrines seem to reinforce Honest History’s contention that Australia seems to be

---

<sup>2</sup> There is, in fact, an entire website (at [www.battleforaustralia.org](http://www.battleforaustralia.org)) seemingly devoted to attacking Stanley’s ‘cowardice’ and treachery’.

obsessed with a military past that it increasingly wishes to reinvent, in order to cast the best possible light on the diggers.

As is often the case, though, it is not what someone says, but how someone says it that makes a difference, and on this count, we must conclude that Honest History — as an organisation and concept — is needlessly antagonistic. The name of the group is its first problem. The implication, of course, is that the group conducts ‘honest’ work, while other historians are presumably ‘dishonest’. As most undergraduates know, one rarely agrees totally with an historian’s work, but that does not make that historian a liar, and Honest History’s implicit suggestion that *its* view of history is the true, mandated version is, frankly, insulting. Stanley and the executive seem belatedly to have recognised this problem, and the Honest History website includes a ‘clarification’ of the name, along with a denial that there is any suggestion of honest versus dishonest discourse. This clarification would be far more convincing if the name had not consciously been chosen to reflect this very view. One is reminded of the general rule of thumb that any nation whose official title includes the word ‘democratic’ is probably anything but; in this case, Honest History doth protest too much.

Yet Honest History’s needling antagonism goes beyond its nomenclature. There is some justification in the group highlighting the enormous sums of money that the Australian government devoted to centenary commemorations of the Gallipoli campaign of 1915, and there is no denying that contrarian voices speaking up against questionable but state-

sanctioned narratives are welcome. I also wish to acknowledge that the group has done academic integrity a great service by criticising Hal Colebatch’s most recent polemic against the Left (unsurprisingly published by *Quadrant*). At times, though, Honest History dips its toes into waters both sublime and ridiculous. The commercial release of a Swedish perfume, ‘Rose of No-Man’s-Land’, is by all means crass and in poor taste, but is it really necessary for a group of supposedly serious intellectuals to write a missive in response, concluding that they hope this ‘trench pong’ gives its wearers warts? ‘Balanced history’ does not involve accusing those with positive views of the Anzac legacy of partaking in ‘Anzackery’, a term invented by the group and applied with barely disguised glee. Earlier this year, Stanley railed against a First World War exhibition opening at the Melbourne Museum, because a primary school band was receiving: ‘instruction [*sic.*] in drumming: not a good start, militarisation of children’. In the Coalition government’s infamous recent pamphlet on recognizing extremism, one of the key identifiers for a hypothetical radical was that she was a fan of alternative music. In Stanley’s world, every percussionist is would-be cannon fodder.

Perhaps the group’s strangest action, however, was its denouncement of the actor and director, Russell Crowe, and his film, *The Water Diviner*. As a work of artistry, the reader is encouraged to make up his or her own mind about the movie — there is, after all, no accounting for taste — but the rationale behind it seems to fit quite nicely with the supposed aims of the

organisation. Crowe's now-famous interview on the Seven Network's *Sunday Night*, in which he reminded the audience that the Dardanelles campaign was, after all, an invasion of a sovereign power, seems to be just the sort of thing the Honest Historians would want to see (and it is unlikely that the group would have objected to Crowe appearing in a tracksuit). Referring to Gallipoli, Crowe used language that Seven, through its online news presence, called 'controversial'. This included the claim that the Ottoman armies had suffered in greater numbers than the Anzacs, and that the campaign as a whole has been 'mythologised' in Australia. Seven's rival, News Corporation, also reported the interview, and polled users of [news.com.au](http://news.com.au) with the question: 'Is Russell Crowe being disrespectful?' The very fact that such a question could be asked about demonstrable facts is astonishing. The interview was hardly Crowe at his most eloquent. Even so, there is no conceivable reason why his comments should have been considered 'controversial' or 'disrespectful', because the fact remains they were true and correct. Australian soldiers *did* invade the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman dead numbered somewhere between 58,000 to 68,000. Finally, the ensuing controversy confirmed Crowe's contention that Gallipoli had become almost a religion to the Australian public; as a sacred public narrative, it was beyond even the mild reproach offered by the actor.

All this should surely have piqued Honest History's sympathies. Indeed, at least one member was impressed, writing



that Crowe had admirably ‘avoided Anzackery’ (there’s that word again!) in his celluloid masterpiece. This proved to be a lone voice of support. ‘What a load of historical tosh!’ Stanley informed his Twitter followers upon seeing *The Water Diviner*, and followed this withering critique with a comprehensive review on the Honest History site. Stanley’s opinion of the plot was uncomplimentary (which, again, is within his remit), but given the publication of the review under the masthead of his organisation, his historical judgement was more relevant. In this, Stanley gave no allowance for the requirements of entertainment and the artistic demands of the filmmakers. Some of the criticisms were no doubt well deserved — the Ottoman troops attack the Anzacs a day late and in an apparently unseasonably warm December, for example — but others demonstrate the sort of nitpicking pedantry that hardly endears subject matter experts to the public. In due course, Stanley complains that one of Crowe’s soldier-sons is too young, that the wrong unit of fusiliers is shown occupying Constantinople after the war, and that the aforementioned sons cannot possibly have been killed on 7 August 1915 at Lone Pine, since their unit (the 7th Battalion) did not join the battle until the next day. At one point, Stanley’s exasperation gets the better of him: ‘Does Russell Crowe especially like beards, besides his own?’ he ruminates, pointing out that some British soldiers are shown with facial hair, when this was not permitted during the war. In this context, his apparently magnanimous appeal to ‘cut Russell Crowe and his writers some slack’ because they do not depict the Armenian Genocide should be seen as disingenuous, unless we are to

believe that depicting British officers with beards is a far more egregious historical crime than ignoring genocide.<sup>3</sup>

Again, I stress that Stanley is well within his rights to dislike *The Water Diviner*, and the film is by no means factually accurate in many respects. But it is the method and manner by which Stanley dismantles the film, on seemingly trivial grounds, that makes this review so grating. And here, then, we see one of the problems of this kind of approach to history. Offered an opportunity to acknowledge an attempt by a well-known public figure to (however clumsily) redress an established historical narrative, Honest History chose instead to castigate this ‘fundamentally silly film’ and its overabundance of beards.

Of course, the reason why Honest History is so upsetting is because it is, at its core, a good idea, and some excellent people are associated with the project. Indeed, the group’s ‘Supporters’ page lists many of the most prominent modern Australian historians, many of whom have published path-breaking works that do truly contribute to a reorientation of Australian historical thought. Such works include a re-examination of Australia’s relationship and attitude towards sex, its dynamic social contexts in times of war, and how history is represented (or misrepresented) in Australian classrooms. Among its ranks are winners of the Prime Minister’s Prize and scholars with truly international reputations.

---

<sup>3</sup> In point of fact, I agree with Stanley that the genocide is irrelevant to the plot of the movie. This, however, makes one wonder why beards are that much more important.

Potentially, it is these ‘supporters’ who *should* be the standard-bearers of innovative public engagement — and many of them do, in fact, have their own individual public profiles. But their success comes from an engagement that seeks to *challenge*, not *antagonise*, and it is this that Honest History gets so wrong. Whether intended or otherwise, the organisation has an air of elitism around it, as though the group collectively shakes its head and marvels at the stupidity of the unwashed and unlearned masses. And yet we live in a country in which the vast majority of the population is educated to at least a secondary level. Never before have Australians been more educated, more literate, and more able to exercise that education and literacy. Whether or not *The Water Diviner* was labelled as being ‘based on true events’, most of its viewers are unlikely to believe that it is a true and accurate representation of Gallipoli. When the Bolsheviks used propaganda films in rural Russia during the Civil War, peasants who had never seen films were so taken aback by projected moving images that they attacked the characters with pitchforks. But cinema has been a form of entertainment for a century now and, whatever Honest History might believe, people are not quite so ignorant. And people are also just as likely to think that a Western Front-inspired perfume is asinine and insensitive, without supposedly serious historians wishing warts upon anyone who might decide to buy it.

The hand that feeds the modern historian belongs to the reading public. It is these people who buy the books, who spur demand in the bookshops, and who, in turn, allow us to build up

and further our publication record, and then repeat the whole process. No one likes to be treated as though he or she is an imbecile. No one wants to be yelled at.

Academic history seems to be in yet another of its periodic moments of crisis. Under attack from politicians and reactionary media commentators who have resurrected the language of the History Wars, starved of funding and support in the educational institutions, and castigated for being inaccessible, history must look to reinvent itself. This must occur in the public eye. But if an offensive is needed, then it must be one of charm rather than insult. The days of sneering aloofness must be consigned to the past, and the iron curtain must be drawn away. And, instead of inflicting our judgement upon the public, we should engage, not antagonise.

But the Western Front could not be seen from space in 1915.

---

## About the Author

**Dr. Bodie A. Ashton** is a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Adelaide and a Historical Advisor for the Sir John Monash Australian War Memorial, to be opened in France in 2018. His specialism is German political, social and cultural history of eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He (sporadically) updates his history blog, [Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.](#), and he can be seen shouting at clouds on Twitter as @bodie\_a\_ashton.