

First Manning Clark Lecture

Delivered by Janet Holmes à Court

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Why is History Important?

I am greatly honoured to have been invited to deliver this lecture, which has been set up as a living memorial to one of Australia's greatest historians.

I am sure that no-one will object if I also use this particular occasion to remember his wife, Dymphna, who died earlier this month, and who provided him with such great support during his life, and worked so hard to perpetuate his memory after his death.

Manning Clark is to me not just an icon of dedicated scholarship, but the ultimate example of someone who was prepared to challenge established interpretations of history and to stand by his conclusions even in the face of quite vitriolic attacks.

It is to be regretted that Dymphna's days of widowhood were marred by a continuation of those vitriolic attacks.

As Kenneth Davidson wrote in *The Age* on 24 April 2000: 'Manning Clark's real sin was that his history threatened the establishment'.

That is a sin which I thoroughly applaud, and so it is with great pleasure that I deliver this address.

I have taken as my point of departure for this lecture the opening sentence of L.P. Hartley's novella *The Go-Between*: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.'

It is a theme which has no doubt been well worked before in the study of history, and debated at length by professional historians, but I am taking it again quite unashamedly as a lay person with an interest in history because it raises so many questions which seem to me to have contemporary relevance.

I am not setting out to try to prove or disprove Hartley's proposition, or indeed to advance an alternative interpretation of the past. I am very much in accord with the view that history is a song sung by a thousand voices and not therefore capable of absolute interpretation.

My less ambitious aim is to share with you some personal reflections on the place of history in our world and its relationship to ordinary men and women who, for various reasons, see it as a foreign country, as remote from their lives as *Tierra del Fuego*.

As someone who was educated in the sciences, who spent the recent years in commerce while cultivating an appetite for the arts over a lifetime, I have learned that caution is appropriate when commenting on territories to which others have devoted their professional lives.

Nevertheless, I shall attempt to explain my own position which is simply that the past is an integral part of all our lives, and that if we do regard it as a foreign country, we do so at our peril.

There is a significant moment in Kingsley Amis' novel *Lucky Jim* when the head of the History Department in a fictitious English provincial university answers the telephone with the presumptuous words: 'HISTORY SPEAKING'.

Now, clearly, we all have our own shorthand call signs when answering the phone, but the novelist's intentions are quite clear in this case. At one level he is emphasising the comic pomposity of one of his main characters, but at a deeper level he is raising the possibility that history might be deemed to be owned by particular groups of people, in this case academics.

It is this sense of ownership, offering access only through an intermediary, which can make history a foreign country shaped all too often by the preconceptions and even prejudices of those who have constructed it.

This idea was reinforced for me recently when I attended the funeral of an old school friend. Often described as the blonde bombshell of our era, Joan was much admired by her school contemporaries, partly because she did not take authority seriously and was something of a rebel against the relatively oppressive school regime of those days.

Her miscreant ways finally landed her in serious trouble, and she was expelled from the history class at a crucial time in the process of preparing for the final school examinations.

The class had covered little ground in the final year syllabus, and so she faced a seemingly impossible uphill battle to achieve even a pass, let alone a respectable mark.

But Joan got hold of a road map for the course, the printed syllabus. She closeted herself in the school hall and engaged in some serious self-directed learning, navigating the way down the road to her personal Damascus to explore a previously very restricted terrain. But now it was no longer enemy territory, and she found she could speak and understand the language, fraternising with locals who had more in common with her than she had ever dreamed of.

At school she had been given a very restricted set of travel guides which focused on England in a European context, ignoring events in her own country. Having been denied access to the school's teaching staff-selected material Joan granted herself a passport and visa to the past, and conquered those unknown expanses, in particular, the history of her own country. When the results of our final examinations were published Joan had won an Exhibition with the highest score in the State for history.

This success can be attributed in part to her own innate intelligence, and in part perhaps even to the efforts of her teachers in preparing the ground in earlier years. But to me the essential point is that the removal of the teacher/interpreter, and his Anglocentric view of the world, allowed Joan to access history on her own terms without it being sifted and distorted through the prejudice and ignorance of yet another opinion. This in turn brought the subject to light, fired her imagination, and gave her a context to understand what was happening in her own world.

In terms of our own individual relationship with history, our schooling is most significant not only because it is something everyone experiences to a greater or lesser extent, but also because it provides the basis for our attitude to history later in life.

Some comments on the teaching of history in schools must therefore be a formative part of this address.

One of the traditional tenets of primary education systems in almost every country in the world is that children should be given a good grounding in the three Rs; reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic. In some systems the fourth R of religion has been added, not so much to educate as to subjugate the learners.

Clearly the acquisition of literacy and numeracy as essential life skills is a worthy educational objective, but it is regrettable in my opinion, that the holy trinity of basic learning has excluded the natural sciences and history.

Of course, these subjects have not been ignored, but they do not appear to have been given the same primacy as the three Rs. As a consequence, we hear recurring laments for the poor quality of general science education: and more recently there has been concern expressed about the nature of history teaching in schools, and an alleged decline in interest in the subject at university level.

I have seen no data to support the claim that history is falling off in popularity as a university subject, but if this is true, we are facing a downward spiral which is likely to drill deeper in to the secondary system, given its dependence on university graduates for its supply of teachers.

The Commonwealth enquiry into the teaching of history in schools by a Monash University research team under the direction of Tony Taylor indicates that there is recognition that a problem exists.

The report is scheduled for completion and submission to the Minister at the end of this month, so it would be premature to speculate on its findings at this stage.

However, there are data to indicate that, with the exception of New South Wales, there has been a significant decline in the study of the subject at secondary level. In Victoria for example, 25.5% of final year school students studied history in 1985. Ten years later in 1995, this figure had dropped to 6.5%. This decline had been arrested at the end of the twentieth century, but it is not yet clear whether there is likely to be a sustained upwards movement.

It was encouraging to read Mr Howard's expressions of regret last month that some people can come out of the education system without having been taught anything at all about what led up to Federation or World War I.

His further comments on the importance of ensuring that young Australians are familiar with the narrative of our national history, should also have been sweet music to the ears of those who think that history should be a core school subject.

Unfortunately, Mr Howard, having made an encouraging run, then dropped the ball by declaring that there should be less emphasis on issues and more on what actually happened. Surely his advisers could have warned him that the two are inseparable unless his intention was that accounts of the past should be very simplistic.

Nevertheless, our spirits should have been revived when he added that we haven't handled the teaching of history in schools as well as we should. History certainly does not seem to have a very high rating in popular youth culture. We are all familiar with that damning reference: 'Oh, he is history now', which condemns some poor individual to the rubbish bin of life as conceived by a particular group. Why is it important that history is recognised as core discipline and properly taught in schools?

Firstly, at its best history should teach students to review a range of information and interpretations, and to apply critical analysis to what is presented, leading to an independent judgement about what happened and why. That judgement may be faulty, indeed in early years until a greater breadth of learning has been acquired, it is likely to be so. But in this instance, it is learning the process which is important.

Secondly, a well-constructed syllabus should connect our national and regional past with contemporary events to provide a context for understanding them. Without this context, and a clear rear-view mirror through which to look back, it is too easy for the political spin-doctors and ideologists to appropriate history for their own ends.

Thirdly, I believe very strongly that history can provide the material which enhances understanding of the place and importance of the arts and sciences in our society, and the interconnectedness of these disciplines. But the subject must be properly taught. It must not convey a one-eyed narrative in terms of either European, Asian, or even Australian events; there must be integration and balance. Nor must the teaching of history be packaged and separated from the study of literature, art and the sciences.

How much I enjoyed Otto Friedrich's book *Olympia: Paris at the Time of Manet* for its linkages of the visual arts, music, architecture, town planning and social and political life in Paris in the late nineteenth century.

I suspect that if we were to look back to our own school experiences, many of us would find that the narrative of history that we were given stopped some 30 years short of our own day, that it was taught in a way to tell a story in terms of a particular national culture, and that it was packaged in tight compartments, separated from other school subjects.

It is my hope that the Taylor Report will address these and other related issues, because if we cannot get the teaching of history right in schools, it will remain a foreign country to future generations, with disastrous consequences.

Fourthly, history should be valuable in helping us all to learn from the mistakes and successes of the past. The notion that history repeats itself is now almost a cliché.

Marx's dictum that historical phenomena always happen twice, the first time as a tragedy, the second time as a farce, is frequently quoted (surely last week's events in Fiji illustrated this), as is George Santayana's quip that those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it. Less often heard is Charles Wolfe's more cynical observation that those who do not study the past will repeat its errors, while those who do will find other ways to err.

However harsh we may be in our judgement of our fellow citizens, it seems hard to me to sustain an argument that we cannot benefit from reflection on what has happened previously in our particular field of activity, prior to making a decision about future action.

It is the ability to analyse those events with a critical eye and in their proper context, which should be one of the primary outcomes of a serious study of history.

If such an outcome does not eventuate from the secondary and tertiary education processes, then future generations are in danger of increasing manipulation by those who want to sell them something, be it a particular brand of shampoo, or a political ideology.

Regrettably, young people learn much of their history through the commercial media, which has no qualms about preventing the truth from getting in the way of a good story.

The film Gallipoli is now thought by a whole generation to be an accurate account of what happened at Suvla Bay, and the list of other film and television feasts which betray and distort the facts is endless.

Commercial media enterprises are clearly going to make what sells, but in doing so, they often ignore the details which make history so vital, and which connect it to ourselves. We cannot reasonably expect re-enactments of the past which last 90 minutes to give us the full story.

A mass audience demands that there be goodies and baddies, a love interest and a happy ending, and if they are not present the controlling forces will write them in.

History then becomes the background for whatever flights of fancy the producers wish to project upon it, commodified, sanitised, edited, and sold to the target audience.

But when film producers present us with their distorted views of history, we forgive them. When politicians do it we must not.

And make no mistake, they do it. History is delicate. It is hard to keep a whole story intact, and half a story which is detached from the other, can do great damage.

The study of history can be like unravelling a Chinese whisper. Like the whisper, people will add to the whole or subtract from it, augmenting for effect or losing bits which are ideologically unacceptable, and making up the missing parts as memories fade and faculties malfunction.

Who actually said what? Or did what? Who started it?

A lot of popular history can be more urban myth than an absolute explanation of what categorically occurred, and the only way to truth is via the source, someone who was there, someone who knew someone who was there, and someone else who wrote a contemporary account of the event if it was from a distance.

Even when someone was there it can be dangerous.

In 1988 I attended the Constitutional Convention in Canberra. One of the other Republicans, Steve Vizard, rushed into print after the event with his account. On reading this I wondered several times if he and I had been to the same convention. Steve is the first to admit that his narrative is a personal view. That is fine, but unless several others publish their accounts there is a danger that Vizard's view will become gospel.

In Australia we have such people who were witness to unbelievable horrors committed in this century, but it would seem that any recognition for having done one's duty to protect one's home and family is selective, and hence distorting.

Many Indigenous Australians fought a long war to save their homeland from the European colonists.

They fought to free the land for their children, and many died in the attempt, but on the 26th of January, we celebrate the arrival in Australia in 1788 by Captain Phillip and the beginning of the process of colonisation which involved extensive bloodshed, and the steady erosion of the position of native Australians.

There are many other Australians, who also fought in two world wars to save their homeland from other potential invaders from the North. They too fought to free the land for their children, and again many died in the attempt.

On the 25th of April we celebrate their heroism and, in particular, their crushing defeat at Gallipoli.

Which group is celebrated as national heroes?

Which group is still fighting for its place in the sun?

The Prime Minister goes about his day safe in the knowledge that the ANZACS lived or are living to a ripe old age, believing that we owe them a great debt of gratitude, and that without them their descendants might well have been subjugated to foreign rule.

He says quite rightly that we must never forget the sacrifices made on our behalf by these brave soldiers, and reminds us of how they died so that we might live.

But Mr. Howard also somehow sleeps at night knowing that the majority of indigenous Australians will be dead before they are 56, mostly of easily preventable diseases. He believes that they owe the

government a huge debt of gratitude for their allocation of the budget, while knowing that these descendants of their abused forefathers will remain dispossessed until they die.

He says that to dwell on these matters is to maintain the now infamous 'black armband' view of history, and not a good idea.

Maybe it might remind us of how they died so that we might live?

John Howard had a great affinity with the First World War. His grandfather fought in it and inspired his father to fight in the second. Grandfather wasn't at Gallipoli, but nevertheless Mr. Howard cuts a dash at the dawn service in Suvla Bay.

He gives thanks to all the brave volunteers who gave their lives for King and Country and calls on their sons, grandsons and great-grandsons to carry on the traditions in the name of their predecessors.

Lest We Forget! And even though the Australians lost the battle they won the war, and with it the victor's privilege to write the history.

And so we have a war which was the 'defining moment of our nation'.

A war in which everyone was keen to play their part.

A war endorsed by every man, woman and child in the land, where our countrymen fought for King and Country but for what purpose it was no doubt unclear to most of them.

Apparently, no previous or subsequent events have ever come closer to distilling the very essence of the tenacious Aussie Battler spirit than that glorious sacrifice.

National heroes, every one of them.

But that was also the war where 8,000 Australians were needlessly murdered by the English High Command on a beach in Turkey while fighting for European trade rights.

We don't hear too much about this war, a war that was fiercely opposed in Australia, that had the two referendums on the need to introduce conscription, in 1916 and 1917, both defeated.

We hear even less about the contribution of organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World, a grassroots workers' movement that arguably helped save the lives of many Australians by encouraging opposition to participation in the war, and who were persecuted and imprisoned for their trouble.

We don't acknowledge the 34,000 14-17 year-olds who were prosecuted or imprisoned between 1911 and 1915 for refusing to participate in compulsory military training.

In a parallel universe, in a parallel history, people like this might have been the heroes, but the Establishment line chooses to ignore them, along with whatever other irritating facts and details fail to fit its agenda.

I'm sure their acts would be considered 'un-Australian', likewise The Eureka Stockade.

Does the Establishment perceive this event as Colonial manifestation of pragmatic Aussie multiculturalism, or as wanton display of Union thuggery?

Mr. Howard is far more relaxed and comfortable with demonstrations of Australian stoicism as encapsulated in the Bodyline cricket tour. And yet we still pledge allegiance to the country which sent thousands of our sons to a pointless death and, damn it, tried to cheat at cricket.

Meanwhile, in defending their homes, the Aborigines were shot, poisoned, raped, murdered, dispossessed and indentured.

The land that gave birth to them had been appropriated by a people that just did not understand, a people that made slaves of those who once roamed free.

They were under attack, so, understandably, defended themselves as best they could, and for this they were further persecuted.

But surely by the same token it could be said that they too are national heroes?

They then tried to fight the invaders in their own courts and play them at their own game, indeed the Yorta Yorta people have been involved in litigation for over one hundred years. But the courts ruled that they did not exist. Terra Nullus stalked the land; the goal posts had been conveniently moved.

It was decided, sometimes, but not always, with the best intentions, that we would relocate selected indigenous offspring in order to offer them a brighter future, a better life, a white life whether they wanted it or not.

We wanted them to become like us, learn our ways, become good Christian, law-abiding citizens.

We never understood that they might want to be themselves, that maybe they considered the ‘every man for himself’, the ‘dog eat dog’ mentality so prevalent in Western civilisation, to be a touch uncivilised.

But now we are told that the stolen generation didn’t happen on any significant scale, and that if it did, it’s not our fault, because we weren’t there, and if we weren’t there, how can we take the blame?

But we were there!!

As David Marr, in his book *The High Price of Heaven* points out, John Howard was there, just as many of us were there and protesting at the time of Australia’s entry into the Vietnam War.

He was an active member of the Methodist Church which ran two ‘homes’ for ‘half-caste’ and ‘neglected’ children, in Perth and Croker Island.

The congregations contributed cash, and the relocation of children continued, including to the Methodists’ Mogumber institution, even after he had entered Parliament.

The current government accepts no responsibility for the appalling treatment of Aborigines over the last 200-odd years because they weren’t there.

Likewise for the stolen generation, although as I have suggested it is more difficult for some to argue an absence from this last manifestation of colonial rule.

And what of the Gallipoli landings? Well, the current generation of politicians weren’t there either, but the Prime Minister happily takes the credit on behalf of a grateful nation for what was done.

Like Hollywood’s presentation of history, the government’s account of some aspects of our heritage is restricted or even distorted to communicate what it wants us to hear. I have spent some time on these particular examples of the duplicitous interpretation of history, because they are things which have an immediacy and touch us all directly.

I would not for a moment suggest however, that Australia’s record is unique in this regard. The manipulation of historical narrative is perhaps one of those human characteristics which dog us, part of our baggage of original sin.

My partner, Frits, grew up in Holland where he was taught that the Boers were the heroes of the Boer War. He migrated to Australia to discover they were the baddies. Now of course we have yet another view endorsed recently by none other than Australia's Head of State, Queen Elizabeth II.

At all levels we occasionally re-mould the past to suit our own needs.

At one fictional extreme we see Winston Smith in Orwell's 1984 employed to rewrite contemporary events to suit the Party's ideology and to provide a historical record consistent with its long-term needs.

Even historians who should be our role models for objectivity are not without occasional blemish. Herodotus, one of the earliest historians, wrote around 450 BC: 'Very few things happen at the right time, and the rest do not happen at all. The conscientious historian will correct these defects.' There appears to be evidence that David Irving, as just one contemporary example, took this advice to heart in his engagement with revisionist history.

We should however, not be too self-righteous in our condemnation of those who seek to fashion history for their own ends. Time distorts the past just as light and distance can distort our vision of how things are now.

Furthermore, it appears to have been a constant human characteristic to want to revive the past. "O call back yesterday, bid time return" says Salisbury in Shakespeare's play, Richard 11.

Sixteenth-century Europe looked to classical art for its inspiration.

Writers like Wells and Verne have been fascinated by time travel.

In our modern world we are witnessing a love affair with the physical remnants of the past which finds its expression through the burgeoning of dealers in antiques, through a growing interest in archives, memorabilia, and genealogy, through the so-called Heritage Industry, and through architectural revivals, the modern Federation style house and the appalling estate agent jargon 'a touch of yesteryear', usually applied to a turn of the century hovel which is virtually unsellable.

In the theatre revivals are everywhere.

This fascination does however tend to want a sanitised past which fits clearly into our own twenty first century environment; the claw foot bath which is fed by instant gas hot water, the Victorian gas lamp illuminated by electricity.

This is perfectly understandable and acceptable, provided it is recognised that the past was not really like this, that the reality of how our ancestors lived was quite different, and that the things we have inherited through the continuum of history and now admire so much, were created through processes which often involved hardship and suffering.

The past was different from the present, but it is undeniably connected with it. They did no things differently there, but the way they did them has shaped the world we have inherited. The past is an integral part of our lives, not a foreign country.

Without the need for human intervention time itself corrupts the past. Ask any three eyewitnesses to an accident what happened three weeks later, and you are likely to get widely conflicting accounts.

This is in part a function of perception and memory, but distance through time often causes us to misread events and to lay our own interpretation on the intent of actions. In this way myths and legends are created.

In the 1990s I was called to give evidence at the Royal Commission enquiring into the activities of that was known as WA Inc. I mentioned to Carmen Lawrence, then Premier of WA, that I was nervous as I couldn't remember very much and would no doubt look quite foolish. Carmen's reply is interesting. She assured me 'no-one remembers much. Those who do remember clearly, are usually lying'.

There is a poem in Philip Larkin's *Whitsun Weddings* collection entitled 'An Arundel Tomb', which succinctly captures this idea in a few couplets:

*Side by side, their faces blurred,
The Earl and Countess lie in stone,
...
They would not think to lie so long.
Such faithfulness in effigy
Was just a detail friends would see:
A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace
Thrown off in helping to prolong
The Latin names around the base.
...
Now, helpless in the hollow of
An unarmorial age, a trough
Of smoke in slow suspended skeins
Above their scrap of history,
Only an attitude remains:
Time has transfigured them into
Untruth ...*

And so, as we stand facing our past, which we do on a daily basis both consciously and unconsciously, we must be aware not only of its linkages to us, but also of time's ability to corrupt its meaning.

Which brings me back again to my opening comments on the importance of history in the curriculum.

I have tried through these few remarks to argue that there is a tendency which could be damaging, for the past to be perceived as a foreign country. I have suggested that this situation is brought about by attitudes to the ownership and accessibility of history, and an assumed right of those in positions of power to write it in terms of particular perceptions.

I have expressed my concern that history is kept at a distance from contemporary events, and that it is not used sufficiently to provide a national or a regional context for our understanding of what is going on around us.

I have above all, expressed my concern that the process of distancing history from all of us can provide opportunities for the unscrupulous to manipulate it to their own ends.

Finally, I have recognised human fascination with aspects of the past, and while accepting our natural desire to adapt it to twentieth-century needs, I have indicated my hope that this does not permanently obscure the truth.

Education must provide the flame which illuminates that truth.

Without it we face the equal danger that the past will become the same country as the present rather than inseparably connected to it, and that the new century will witness repeat performances of our past mistakes.