

The First Dymphna Clark Lecture

Delivered by Anna Clark

at Manning Clark House, on 2 March 2002

It feels a little strange to come back here now, to Manning Clark House, to the house of my grandparents. It's a place with very strong memories which are sometimes difficult to adjust. For me this has always been a house of stories. Things are the same here: the rooms, the beds, the cups of tea, my stuff all over the floor. But they're also very different. Mostly I remember just being here and listening to people talking, so maybe it's appropriate to continue this tradition today. Frequently, the stories would change location — perhaps move into one of a long line of Clark Peugeots and motor down the Hume to a Carlton match, or down to the coast. There are lots of people — some may be here today — who I know well, but have never met. I'm sure it's this endless series of tales and opinions and visitors that fuelled my roundabout interest in history.

I agreed to do this lecture in honour of Dymphna because since her death, and more recently my father Axel's, I've felt that this connection to something that has always been so strong in my own life has suddenly been severed. You can't just ring them up any more and ask about something that happened, or someone who was. There are no more stories around the kitchen table or down the Hume.

I wanted to think about what is this connectedness, this history, which has been so familiar and such a force in the way we think about ourselves. There was always a certain feeling of belonging that came with these stories. And so I wanted to talk about the idea of generations and inheritance that Dymphna represented.

I particularly wanted to introduce you to a box. It could be a metaphor of course, but this one is real. It's not big, but it's strong and rather beautiful. The box is handcrafted and heavy and full. It has a distinctive rattle. It's obviously very old: beaten, scratched and worn, holding relics from past lives. It's a women's box, filled with family life over many generations. A piece of paper explains in Swedish:

This box was presented in 1826
[it] was given by sculptor Sateson to his half-sister Bothilda Osterberg to be cared for and bequeathed to the eldest daughter in the female line. (If it should go astray, whoever is in possession of it is requested to return it.) It was left to Sofi Sjölin, born Osterberg, eldest daughter of Bothilda Osterberg on her death in 1845.
On Sofi Sjölin's death this box was left to Ida Brandtman, born Sjölin, in 1890. She was at that time the eldest daughter.

While it is obviously a women's box, it contains objects of the many lives who circled around its owners: 2 ancient thermometers — reflecting a Swedish obsession with the body, perhaps; jewellery, not valuable, but well worn — old pearl strings, their threads disintegrating, a couple of wedding bands; some traditional Swedish beads; scraps of embroidery; an old lipstick; an acorn tied to string; 2 budgie wings (I can't imagine their significance); a candle; a needle cushion; a miniature perfume bottle long since dried out.

There are endless compartments in the box: drawers and lids and secret places. Some are empty, others contain more stories: a lock of hair; a Scandinavian brooch; locket size photos of children and grandchildren and mothers and fathers; letters from a husband; a husband's wallet. There is also a wonderful pair of gold spectacles. It's as if you might open the box and see yourself in the mirror inside its lid, then put on the spectacles and see yourself through someone else's eyes.

Within the box there is also a genealogy, written in Swedish, explaining the births, marriages and children of its owners. For 150 years, this box immigrated all over the world. For the next thirty, it lived on the chest of drawers in the corridor of this house, a relic of Dymphna's endless family. Now I have the box. And can see where Dymphna added me on to the list soon before she died: 'Axel Clark, married Alison Macintyre 1968. Children Tom 1973, Solomon 1975, Anna born 1978, married...' [a convenient blank, of course].

The box makes me think of series of lives: rings being exchanged at nineteenth century weddings, opening the box in a new place, packing the box off to South Africa then Australia, women adding to the box in turn. Partly these women's lives were lived in the background, but they left traces visible enough if you look for them. This isn't a relic from the past. It is the past — just as it will go on and take bits and pieces from me and then from my descendants.

I don't wish to be over sentimental. But there is also something in the way this box re-enacts Dymphna's own connection of past and future as well as heritage and responsibility — I think these are the words she would use. And she herself was anything but sentimental. Dymphna had a very strong sense of values, and her world was encapsulated by them. For her, walking through the bush, or sending back one of her famous bunches of flowers from the garden comprised the same philosophy as joining the Greens, or campaigning for Landcare or Greening Australia, or planting a couple of thousand trees down on the south coast. This was about enjoying the natural world, and by extension, about the responsibility of handing something on to the next generation, about coming to terms with past misuse.

Her work for Aboriginal land rights echoed this committed sense of an historical justice. It wasn't about coming together and joining hands and appropriating a Dreaming, it was a matter of history and equity and the future. Dymphna worked hard to publicise the need for land rights. She applauded the first step registered by Mabo. At the launch of John Edwards' Keating biography, she responded to Keating's assertion that his government's proud achievement lay in the way it anticipated a Republic. Dymphna instead suggested that the Mabo decision and Native Title would have far greater and worthy consequences for the country. She actively publicised the threats from logging to Aboriginal sacred

sites on Mt Mumbulla, near the family farm down on the coast. And along with Nugget Coombs, Eva Hancock and Judith Wright, Dymphna was a member of the Treaty Committee, which campaigned for formal recognition of land rights and official acknowledgement of Indigenous dispossession. In August 1979, the Committee published an ad in the *National Times* appealing for a Treaty with Aboriginal people, signed amongst others, by a member of the present Howard Cabinet as well as Geoffrey Blainey [1](#). How times change. Seventeen years later Blainey accused the Wik High Court Judges of being 'gripped by their black armbands' and for advocating a divided Australia. 'It perpetuates a new form of racial discrimination,' he said, 'a nation-wide form of land tenure based on race.'[2](#)

Of course, in debates about history today, there is a tendency to mask its complex continuity with the present. History becomes cast as 'black armband': overly negative and emotional; at best naïve, at worst, unAustralian. Such slogans are a perversion, implicitly linking the 'Guilt Industry', 'Aboriginal Industry' and 'Multicultural Industry' with a dark Australian past. Its converse of course is the mythological 'mainstream', where Australians deserve better, and their history is served sunny side up.

This division of the past into black and white has permeated most sections of Australian public life. In the media, critical Australian histories have been derided for their 'negativity' and 'imbalance'. In 1993, Blainey's Latham Lecture introduced the term 'Black Armband' and argued that the academic mood had swung away from histories which had been 'too favourable, too extreme, to an opposite extreme that is even more unreal and decidedly jaundiced'. 'Black Armband' history was a corrective that had gone too far.

Gerard Henderson similarly argued that

Australians are variously portrayed as racist, sexist, materialist and with very little culture... This is alienated history at its worst. On any balanced analysis, Australia has been a remarkably successful nation. [3](#)

Writing for *Quadrant*, the freelance historian Robert Murray exclaimed that historical revision was seeping 'into general public ideas about the past', and endangering the national narrative.[4](#)

The belief that a dangerous revisionism was descending over the nation was widespread. Like red communist arrows advancing across 1950s maps of Asia, an insidious ideological threat was seeping into homes throughout Australia via newspapers, television and even school texts. Critical history was harmful, wrong and increasingly prominent.

In February 1994, a new school text in Queensland suggested teachers use 'invasion' rather than 'settlement'. It also maintained that the use of 'explorer', 'pioneer' and 'discoverer' were unsuitable because they implied Australia was uninhabited before colonisation. Queensland Labor Premier, Wayne Goss declared that the 'politically correct' references in the new Year 5 Social Studies textbook went too far:

I think just about all Australians would not regard what happened in 1788 as an invasion.

There is a world of difference between the arrival of the First Fleet and what most people understand as an invasion. [5](#)

Later that year, the Liberal Minister for Education in New South Wales, Virginia Chadwick, was similarly condemned at the National Party State Conference for allowing the word 'invasion' to be included in the new primary social studies syllabus in place of 'settlement'. [6](#) A delegate who initiated the motion said there was no need to change the way that Australian children had been learning for the last two hundred years. [7](#)

The draft was toned down. 'Invasion' was removed and replaced by more neutral terms, such as 'arrival of British people' and 'before 1788'.[8](#) In response, the New South Wales Teachers' Federation threatened to ban the syllabus. Then in Opposition, John Howard accused the Federation of attempting to distort the past to make a 'contemporary political point'. Its members were guilty of 'ideologically driven intellectual thuggery'.[9](#) 'The description "invasion"', he later maintained, 'should never have been in the syllabus in the first place'.[10](#) Speaking with John Laws after his election in 1996, Howard denounced the 'Black Armband' curriculum:

To tell children whose parents were not part of that treatment, to tell children who themselves have been no part of it, that we're all part of it, that we're part of a sort of racist and bigoted history is something that Australians reject. [11](#) Historical debate in Australia has been lively for a long time. The heated contest over the national past during the Bicentennial celebrations and survivals is an example that springs to mind here. But Blainey's conception of the black armband metaphor has resonated with particular strength. And the idea of a dark history sweeping away generations of Australian pride has now become 'mainstream'. More sinister I think has been the appropriation of this black and white, us and them dichotomy as part of a wider political strategy, where the past is used as a cynical ploy at the expense of the lives that comprise it.

I can still see Dymphna's hurt and dismay when Manning was denounced as a traitor and a spy. She bravely said nothing, of course — anything one said would be turned into ammunition — but the *Courier-Mail* didn't even bother to check let alone think. Manning's ASIO file was deliberately misquoted. Dymphna's English language tutoring of Russian Diplomats was used to prove they were both compromised communists. She told me that it was Menzies himself who had organised or suggested the English teaching as a gesture of goodwill.

Manning's denunciation had more to do with a Howard imperative to reclaim Australian history and denounce Labor's icons than the red covers on his six volumes. Labor's 'propaganda' and 'revisionist history', Howard at times argued, was allowing the past to serve Labor's cause.[12](#) The Liberal Party, he maintained, needed to reject the 'attempted re-writing of Australian political history by our political opponents'. [13](#)

In 1997, the report into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families was published and tabled in Federal Parliament.[14](#) The Federal government refused to apologise to the Stolen Generations. John Herron, the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, stated in a letter to the reconciliation activist, Father Frank Brennan that

the government does not support an official national apology. Such an apology could imply that present generations are in some way responsible and accountable for the actions of earlier generations, actions that were sanctioned by the laws of the time, and that were believed to be in the best interests of the children involved. [15](#)

This issue was revisited again in the year 2000, as the question of responsibility for the Stolen Generations arose. A government submission to the Senate inquiry on compensation for children forcibly removed dismissed the term 'stolen generation' as inaccurate. It stated:

The government is concerned that there is no reliable basis for what appears to be a generally accepted conclusion as to the supposed dimensions of the 'stolen generation'. [...]

At most, it might be inferred that up to 10% of children were separated for a variety of reasons, both protective and otherwise, some forcibly and some not. This does not constitute a 'generation' of 'stolen' children. The phrase 'stolen generation' is rhetorical. [16](#)

Only three weeks after the Government submission had denied the 'stolen generation', Howard went to Gallipoli to praise the 'remarkable legacy' of the Anzac. [17](#) At the Dawn Service he gave thanks:

Thus we come to this place at this hour on this day to observe not only a dawn but a dusk. For dusk has all but fallen on that great-hearted generation of Australians who fought here. [18](#)

Ostensibly, the exact figures of child removal were hard to establish. Apparently it was impossible to offer a formal apology to the victims because there was simply no historical continuity between the actions of those in the past with the present. Yet less than 10% of the Australian population enlisted in World War One, [19](#) and Howard was commending the inheritance we claim from the Anzacs today.

[W]e claim from them a heritage of personal courage and initiative... We come to join with those that rest here in a shared love of our nation. [20](#)

Howard affirmed a white Anzac inheritance only weeks after denying a black one. This is an historical hypocrisy, where some connections to the past are prized and others denied.

The attack on critical readings of the national past has established an historical discussion where the past is divided along black and white, and where the only way to respond, it seems, is to accept its dualistic approach.

Some progressive historians have accepted the terminology of the so called 'Black Armband' debate and embraced critical history as 'Black Armband' in an attempt to deflect the slogan away from its target of revision. Historians such as Janet McCalman and Henry Reynolds have decried the violent history of Australia, and simply stated that we have 'no honest alternative' but to wear black armbands. Stephen Muecke, a cultural studies and linguistics scholar at

the University of Technology in Sydney, argued that wearing black armbands has nothing to do with guilt. It's about remembering the dead. Precisely, he has suggested, what Australia ought to be doing with its black histories as well as its white.

Even Robert Manne, who ran a protracted campaign against critical histories during the early 90s as editor of *Quadrant*, came to embrace much of the history that was coming to light with the report into the stolen generations, *Bringing them home*. Manne was editor when *Quadrant* published Blainey's 1993 Latham Lecture that had introduced the term 'Black Armband'. He also published Peter Ryan's crucifixion of Manning's *History*. But after the 1996 election, Manne was shocked by the Howard government's attitude to race politics, accusing them of harbouring a moral blindspot towards Aboriginal people. 'Australian historians should indeed wear black armbands', he later lamented.²¹

Historian Tony Birch has described Blainey and Howard's claims to historical objectivity and balance as weightless, their criticisms of 'black histories' blinded by their own 'white veils'.²² The term 'White Blindfold' has also been used tactically to describe conservative criticisms of revisionist history.²³ Like reclaiming 'Black Armband', the use of 'White Blindfold' is a rhetorical device, aimed at wresting control away from conservatives in the debate.

So 'Black Armband' has been in a sense reappropriated. No longer a pejorative label, for some it is once more a symbol of veneration. Critical histories, challenging histories, sad histories, can hold their place legitimately. 'White Blindfold' is also a clever twist. But I think you have to acknowledge that adopting the language of the debate perpetuates its skewed framework. Accepting 'Black Armband' accepts that history can be as simple as black and white. Rather than talk about history in such narrow parameters, we need to look at what it means to have differing historical perspectives. We need complexity, not simplicity.

Historical debates have done their job in a sense: closing down approaches to the past along lines of affirmative and negative. But such divisions have deeply moral and wide-reaching consequences. As a political strategy, the appropriation of the past in fact reifies it. But in doing so, the connections and continuities of history are lost. History becomes 'something', rather than many things. The box isn't about a symbolic reconciliation with the past. It isn't about getting back to the box, 'getting back to basics' — because that too is a slogan. The box is an example of something genuine and meaningful, which has a long and continuous history, which links past and present and future, which contains memories and keeps history alive.

This isn't supposed to be about sentimentality. It's not about glorifying Dymphna and the box. But there was a simple morality of family and inheritance for her that was built on connectedness and belonging. I was in Sweden a few years ago, and managed to visit some of the extended family there. When they pulled out the family tree, there was Dymphna's unmistakable handwriting, adding a few more grandchildren on the end of an ancient genealogical map.

Everything from the past is around us. Some, like Dymphna, live their whole life with that recognition. Others struggle to find it, to come to terms with it. Or they ignore it altogether.

- 1 National Times, 25 August 1979.
- 2 Geoffrey Blainey, 'Black Future', The Bulletin, 8 April 1997, p22.
- 3 Gerard Henderson, 'Rewriting Our History', The Bulletin, January 19/February 2, 1993, pp26-7.
- 4 Robert Murray, 'Seven Myths About Australia', Quadrant, May 1992, p40.
- 5 Julie Lewis, 'Goss repels "invaders"', The Sydney Morning Herald, February 9, 1994.
- 6 'Nats condemn Minister's "distortion of history"', The Sydney Morning Herald, June 20, 1994.
- 7 Michael Wilkins, 'Nationals condemn Chadwick "invasion"', The Sunday Telegraph, June 19, 1994.
- 8 Julie Lewis, 'Teachers threaten syllabus ban', The Sydney Morning Herald, June 29, 1994. See also Alan Barcan, 'History in Decay', Quadrant, July 1999.
- 9 cit. Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?: A personal search for the truth about our history*, Ringwood, Vic.: Viking, 1999, p160.
- 10 Editorial, 'An invasion indeed', The Sydney Morning Herald, June 26, 1995.
- 11 cit. Judith Brett, Opinion, The Age, November 8, 1996, pA15.
- 12 John Howard, 'Some Thoughts on Liberal Party Philosophy in the 1990s', Quadrant, July-August 1994, p21.
- 13 John Howard, 1996 Sir Robert Menzies Lecture, November 18, 1996: <http://www.nla.gov.au/pmc/pressrel/menzies.htm>.
- 14 Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, *Bringing them home*, April 1997.
- 15 John Herron (Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs) to Father Frank Brennan, cited in Robert Manne, 'The Stolen Generations', Quadrant, January-February 1998, p55. A year earlier, Herron had made similar comments in the Joe and Dame Enid Lyons Memorial Lecture, Australian National University, University House, Canberra, November 15, 1996.
- 16 John Herron, 'A generation was not stolen' (Federal Government's submission to the Senate inquiry), The Sydney Morning Herald, April 4, 2000.
- 17 John Howard, 'Pilgrimage to define the future of a nation' (speech made at Gallipoli service, April 25, 2000), The Sydney Morning Herald, April 26, 2000.
- 18 Ibid.

19 Richard Nile, 'Wars of Words', in Richard Nile [ed.], *The Australian Legend and its Discontents*, St Lucia 2000, p184.

20 Howard, 'Pilgrimage to define the future of a nation'.

21 Muecke, 'No guilt with b/a', *AFR*, 4.4.97; McCalman and Manne arguing in the Inaugural Melbourne Debate, 'That Australia's historians should wear black armbands', *MHJ*, vol. 26, 1998. Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?*

22 Birch, *op. cit.*

23 See Ann Curthoys, 'Mythologies', in Richard Nile [ed.], *The Australian Legend and Its Discontents*, St. Lucia 2000, pp12,16; and Ferrier, *op. cit.*, p42.