

## WHAT THEY WANT AND WHAT THEY GET: HISTORY AND ITS MARKETS<sup>1</sup>

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"And who persuades the general public to read history?" asks the heroine of Penelope Lively's novel *Moon Tiger*, a popularising historian at odds with the academy. "People like me," she says, "not the Eltons and Trevor-Ropers."<sup>2</sup>

There are a number of issues here, about the nature of history-writing and its market. Who is history written for? Why should we write it or encourage it to be written? How does it relate to the reading public outside the universities?

No doubt these questions have a familiar ring, as part of the old attack on the academic ivory tower. But the argument is about more than intellectual elitism. The point comes clearer when one looks at this kind of cultural pursuit in economic terms. For the nature of historical production and historical activity generally is dictated by its market. It is the consumers of history who pay for its production and determine what kind of history is produced. What I would like to suggest is that we essentially have two markets for history, formed by the demands of tertiary education and research on the one hand, and by the general public on the other. I would like to suggest that the academic market is now big enough to be largely self-sufficient: it can consume what it produces. And that has a number of implications for cultural development in the society as a whole.

As far as the viability of history-writing is confirmed, these are issues which used not to matter in the days when the university system was expanding and the funding for it was relatively assured. The right of departments of History (or any other subject) to determine what was taught and to establish criteria for assessing published work was defensible by the general argument for academic freedom, the unfettered right of the universities to think and teach whatever seemed appropriate to the provision of a liberal education and an independent critique of society.

We have long been confident about what we mean by a liberal education and the contribution a study of history makes to it. The objective of Professor R.M.Crawford in recreating Melbourne University's Department of History in the late 1930s remains a valid objective for History departments in the 1980s:

Turning out historians was an acceptable by-product of the main task, which was to equip one's pupils for a more interesting life and to train them to act with some independence of mind and a readiness to consider evidence, in whatever field of activity they went into.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, in the 1980s there are also other and broader cultural questions to consider in placing the work of academic historians in context with history activities (not just publications) outside the universities

Two trends deserve attention in thinking about this. The first of these is the great surge of interest in history outside the universities. This has been evident for some time in the proliferation of historical societies in the burgeoning of the heritage movement, in the recent vast expenditure on museums (with a more or less corresponding increase in visitor numbers), in the number of media productions on historical themes, and in the explosion of genealogy, now one of the most popular of all leisure pursuits. These are all evidence of a great groundswell of interest in history as a broadly based cultural concern outside and independent of the universities.

The universities have responded, up to a point. The History Institute, Victoria has been a unique initiative in reconciling those interested in history outside the universities with those who pursue it in academic surroundings and according to academic standards and traditions. Courses in Public History are a feature of a number of institutions, and individual academic historians have been intensely active in history and heritage matters outside academia. At the same time, as more and more historians are employed outside the universities, professional associations have sprung up in New South Wales (the Professional Historians Association), in South Australia (the Association of Professional Historians) and in Western Australia (the Professional Historians and Researchers Association), to promote and represent professional, non-academic historians. A similar role, among others, is played by The History Institute, Victoria.

The second trend we should recognise is the growing demand for academic accountability, and, related to this, a rethinking of History's place in the school curriculum currently taking place in at least three States.

There has been enough debate over the demand for academic accountability for me simply to recognise it here, though in doing so it is worth saying that any attempt to attribute it only to the present Minister for Education, even to the relevant sections of the Labor Party, would be a mistake: it is more deep-rooted than this, and has grown over a considerable period of time.

It is, however, worth spending some time on one example of it, *Windows onto worlds, the report of the Committee on Research into Australian Studies* (CRASTE), published in 1987.

There is no doubt that the CRASTE report was not well received by academics. Those used to believing in the role of the humanities, including History, in providing a broad liberal education acceptable throughout the western world, have rebelled at the apparent provincialism in the report's emphasis on Australianising the curriculum.

And from the perspective of this paper, it should also be said that the CRASTE committee's institutional focus is a little narrow. We are after all concerned here with the production and consumption of history as a whole, and not just in

institutions. This was not the committee's brief, of course, but the broader aspects of the issue should be asserted; teaching and research in tertiary institutions are only parts of a much broader spectrum of cultural activity. In the end, what we have to consider is the nature of our cultural interaction, at least as far as history is concerned, across all the media of cultural expression, including the mass media themselves, amateur associations, and so on, and the ideas expressed in that interaction which we resort to in making decisions about how we live and organise ourselves as a society, and the contribution that historical discussion makes to that.

All that said, the Committee's argument for Australianising the curriculum is in its own way an argument for the accountability of academic historians to the society outside the universities. In this sense, the reaction to the report recognises that its argument is a counter to the concept of a liberal education which is internationally acceptable but which does not imply a foundation in the society it serves. In place of Professor Crawford's statement of the educational value of history as a generally applicable form of intellectual training, the CRASTE report thus offers the proposition that historians should be accountable at least to the extent of recognising an Australian context for their work.

There is no doubt that this idea has support, at least in the pre-tertiary education systems. An Australian Studies course of up to two years (compulsory for all Year 11 students and optional at Year 12) has been accredited in Victoria, and a semester course (also compulsory for Year 11 students) is likely for South Australia. This comes at a time of growing popularity of Australian History.

At the same time, there are well-established trends in three States towards a questioning of the place of History in the school curriculum and of the form and context in which it should be taught, amounting to a threat to the integrity of History as a separate discipline in the long term. The trend to Australian Studies could be seen as part of this: certainly, fears have been expressed in Victoria about the possible impact of the subject on Australian History at year 12. At the same time, there has been a parallel trend towards the aggregation of subjects into subject areas. In some South Australian schools it is likely that many students will be able to take History only as part of amore general curriculum area, Human Society, which it shares with Geography, Legal Studies, Social Studies, Politics and Religion Studies. A similar development has been experienced in Victoria, with Social Education.

On the face of it, we could argue that history should be able to cope. As I have suggested, there is a strong swell of support for historical activities outside the universities, as historical societies multiply, genealogy thrives, the heritage industry consolidates, queues grow at museum doors and the mass media continue to exploit historical themes. Meanwhile in the universities there are more historians and more students than ever before. It may be that these will sustain a generalised sense of process and development, and perhaps a training

in historical method will continue to provide the basis of those aspects of a liberal education to which history has so long contributed.

Nonetheless, as I have indicated, the foundations of academic history, in form of History subjects taught in the schools and an acceptance by Government of the premises on which History is taught and researched, are being challenged. And I would like to suggest that this could have something to do with the division in the historical community, the division in the historical market as I have called it.

In 1984, The History Institute, Victoria inaugurated its series of "Historians on history" forums with an afternoon of addresses by Professors R.M. Crawford, Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey. It was a spellbinding occasion, and the three lectures were later preserved in a little book edited Stuart McIntyre, *Making history*.

Professor Crawford's contribution holds a particular fascination, amounting as it does to an account of the intellectual origins of the Melbourne University School of History as we know it, going back to his appointment to the Ernest Scott Chair of History in 1937. His experience is representative of the changes which have transformed academic history since then. "In those days," he told his audience, "no Australian university department of history had more than two full time teachers, and only a tiny few of one's graduates could ever hope for academic appointments."<sup>4</sup> Specialisation was not possible with so few staff; the new Professor himself had to teach six courses, with a background in only one of them.<sup>5</sup> In any case, the "main task" of an education in history was, as I have said, not to produce specialists but to train people to get more out and to cope better with occupations other than historical research and teaching.

In practice however, as Stuart McIntyre points out in his introduction, the Melbourne department soon found its 'main task' to be producing historians to staff other departments. These were more and more the products of the burgeoning PhD industry, which was itself something of a problem to Crawford:

...he viewed the consequences of the PhD industry with distaste. All its expertise amounted to little more than 'eunuch-like sterility' since it lacked any vision or social purpose.<sup>6</sup>

So the department's emphasis on rigorous argument from the primary sources became the hallmark, not so much of its liberal education for a life outside the university, but of its professional training, and from there, of a distinctive academic approach to the writing of history, so that what historians wrote for their colleagues was less and less readable by the general public.

As it happens, none of the Institute's three speakers at its 1984 forum, including Crawford, possessed a PhD. Nonetheless, the requirements of the PhD had much to do with creating the tone of academic history in the course of the vast expansion it underwent during Crawford's tenure of his Chair, an expansion

which saw the number of academic historians in Australia~ grow from a dozen in 1939 to 750 in 1971.

During the period of this expansion, and however liberal the original intention, the Melbourne department (and indeed academic history teaching in general) became geared, through the medium of the PhD, to emphasising methodological rigour more than the development of historical sensibility or a sense of the cultural value of historical writing.

In all this, the Melbourne experience merely reflected an international trend. The growth in the academic market represented by the new academic historians and their audiences, formed as it was by the demands of the PhD degree, saw publications aimed mainly at that market and evaluated by it on largely methodological criteria; did the piece exhaust the available material? Were the conclusions supported by the evidence? Did the piece pay enough heed to the secondary sources? Stuart McIntyre sums up the dilemma from the point of view of Professor Crawford, reluctantly presiding over it all:

History had become a profession which the novice entered after extensive training leading to a PhD.... Within the burgeoning history departments, specialists plied their trade, speaking to each other in increasingly arcane dialects and publishing their work either in monographs or articles for the specialist journals that sprang up through the 1960s and 1970s. The authority of the god-professor gave way to the ponderous deliberations of committees, and a smorgasbord of courses replaced the old, unified syllabus.<sup>7</sup>

And what happened to the historical societies and other non-professional devotees of history in all this? This is a little harder to deduce without further research. Developing the Melbourne case-study further, one useful touchstone is the relationship between the Royal Historical Society of Victoria with the academic historians of the Melbourne department. It does seem that the communion between the two was much freer in the 1930s and 1940s than it was, for example, in the 1970s, when the Society had little impact on those of us who were students at that time. And when The History Institute, Victoria was formed in 1981, it was clear that a sense of territory had developed, with local and Victorian history the province of the Society and national and international fields dealt with by the University. Things have moved on, of course, with greater co-operation and warmer relations between the two bodies, and the appointment of AGL Shaw, the Institute's former Chairman, as President of the Society. But the consequences of academic specialisation, and the division of interest and activity between academic and non-academic history were real, and while the improvement in relations between the Institute and the Society is symptomatic of some narrowing of the gap, a number of problems persist.

To begin with, much academic research, most notably much of that carried out for higher degrees, is not easily available to non-professional historians unless published. It is significant that the criteria for assessing a work for publication are not the same as those for assessing it for the purposes of awarding a degree, so

a piece approved as research leading to a degree is not necessarily going to be seen as suitable for publication. Similarly, the pressures of writing to satisfy the demands of colleagues (whether as journal editors, or members of appointment or promotion committees), tends to exclude academic historians from the non-academic market, despite the numbers who successfully bridge the gap.

At the same time, the growth in non-academic activity in history has taken place with relatively little contribution from the tertiary institutions, though as I have noted they (and their graduates) have begun to respond. Public History courses, the various professional associations, and the History Institute, not to mention history programs on the ABC, are cases in point, together with a greater use of qualified historical consultants in other media productions.

Nonetheless, as I have said, history faces challenges from developments outside the universities. The CRASTE report proposes a form of cultural accountability which would have history justify its place in a specifically Australian cultural spectrum of activity, while in the schools the form the subject takes is likely to change as it competes with other disciplines in a reformed curriculum. These and similar pressures will increasingly affect a university environment which, despite the many positive developments in recent years, remains dominated by the demands of the academic market rather than by a need for historical debate to relate to non-academic cultural concerns.

There is no doubting the discipline which the development of an academic market has brought to the writing of history, or the continuing importance of attention to evidence and rigour of argument. At the same time, there is a need to work for a broader and more inclusive historical culture. The History Institute, Victoria remains unique as a bridge between academic and non-academic history; it should be strengthened and copied, particularly in creating links between historians and associated groups, such as teachers, librarians, archivists historical societies, heritage organisations, museums and genealogists.

More fundamentally, the PhD needs reconsideration, especially now that PhD graduates, like Honours graduates before them, are less and less employable in the tertiary institutions. Painful as it is, the change reminds us that the writing of history is a cultural activity, it deals in values and beliefs, it talks about the interaction of people with each other, and once the problems of interpretation, evaluation and explanation have been dealt with, it tells us that underneath it all, history is still a form of literature, dealing with the oldest of literary questions, what is owing between one person, or one group, or one nation and another.

Interestingly, this was a common thread in the discussions published in *Making history*. Geoffrey Blainey spoke of the confidence of grant applicants that their work would advance knowledge:

We can't be sure, however, that knowledge always advances... with the increasing emphasis on investigating small problems, especially since the PhD has become an

important part of academic training – and it's impressed on students, often against their will, that they should take a small problem - we can't be sure that research is necessarily fruitful. It is building up a storehouse of knowledge, but who has the key to the storehouse? And who has the key to all these separate, locked rooms inside the storehouse? <sup>8</sup>

Listening to Professor Crawford, Stuart McIntyre found himself transported to a lost world:

Yet to hear again of the study of history as a truly liberal education, the historian mediating other branches of knowledge and charting a voyage between freedom and necessity, was to realise with a start how irretrievably lost is that humanist vision. Barely a quarter-century has elapsed since such a conception of historical scholarship provided the profession with its vocabulary and concerns... In today's world of narrow specialisms and agnostic expertise, they seem almost antediluvian. <sup>9</sup>

And Manning Clark ended his address with a characteristic distinction. "Historians are not annalists" he said, "they are lovers and believers."<sup>10</sup>

So what does this mean in practical terms for the teaching and writing of academic history? There may be a range of possible answers, but these answers may include that there should be more emphasis on the development of a literary sensibility in training historians, and that academic criteria in assessing written history should be closer to those of reviewers for the general public. Penelope Lively's heroine asks herself what the history she has written means to *her*. "Like everything else," she writes, "it enlarges me, it frees me from the prison of my experience; it also resounds within that experience."<sup>11</sup> One might hope it would do the same for her readers and that readers of history, like readers of other literature, might find it relevant to think who their favourite writers of history are, not because of their field of interest but because of their writing, *as writing*.

Questions of this sort also raise issues about the past itself. One of the difficulties with historical writing as it has developed, and as I hope I have implied, is that the appeal of so much of it depends on specialised knowledge or at least on specialised interest. It is therefore worth thinking more about the nature of the past and our relationship to it, which is common ground for everyone interested in historical enquiry. From here would come a sharper philosophical sense of the cultural role of history which has perhaps been lacking in the emphasis in recent years on perfecting the writing of history as a technical craft.

In the end, the question is, as I have suggested, one of markets. Who reads history? Even more important, who could or should read it, or participate in its production, who does not do so now? And how can the various wings of the historical community be brought together with a sense that the production and consumption of history is a matter of general cultural concern? In the face of the

changes affecting history inside and outside the universities, I believe it is time to rethink.

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<sup>1</sup> Published as "What they want and what they get: history and its markets," *Australian Historical Association Bulletin* 59-60, Aug-Nov 1989

<sup>2</sup> Penelope Lively, *Moon tiger*, Penguin 1987, p.60

<sup>3</sup> *Making history*, ed Stuart McIntyre, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne 1984, p.45

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.45

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.44

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* p.19

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* p.18

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*p.72

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* p.3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* p.67

<sup>11</sup> Lively, *op.cit.*, p.158