

HISTORICAL SENSIBILITY

Many historians have a clear idea of what they believe history is good for. As one recent writer in these pages put it:

History is a living discipline – an essential tool for policy makers, professionals of every variety and any politically or socially aware citizen. Wherever it is taught history serves vocational as well as social functions. It is important to learn how to reduce “a range of information to a few essential points”; just as the search for wisdom is assisted by an understanding of what went before.¹

And yet this doesn't seem to be enough. While many thousands of people are pursuing history in the community as a personal interest, unpaid and with minimal resources, these are not reflected in the numbers of students taking history in the schools and universities². What is going wrong in the institutions that is going right in the community? If history is so good for us why are so few people choosing to do it at school and university? Is it really just a matter of selling it better, and if so, what exactly is to be sold?

While eloquent on why people *should* take an interest in history, historians are less confident in saying why anyone should *want* to do so, as so many clearly do. In answering this question, it may be helpful to approach history not so much as a useful tool for policy makers, pursued by the few for the few, but as a way in which we define ourselves and our values as a society. In this sense it may be useful to look at history as a cultural pursuit, that is, as a creative dialogue between the present and the past which is the source not just of new understanding about cause and effect in past events, but also of the meanings enacted in those events. In doing so it may be helpful to look at how, over time, Australian historians have defined their discipline, its values and their own role; at the source of people's response to historical material, which we could call their historical sensibility; at the nature of historical explication; and at the suggestion that the experience embodied in events is just as important as their causes, beginning with the case of Manning Clark

“It was time”, wrote Manning Clark about his conception of *A history of Australia*, his life’s work,

to have a go at telling the whole story, time to run the risk of discovering whether I had anything to say and could say it. There had been an earlier attempt - the attempt to write a textbook history - which would be very “yes and no” in the accepted textbook style, and very dull. But that sort of truth was not within me. Now I wanted to write history as a story - history as an art. In *The tree of man* Patrick White had just shown it was possible to discuss the themes that interested me in a novel. That was an inspiration to start - to show that a historian could do it.³

Preparation for writing “history as an art” did not consist of an immediate excursion to the archives. Clark sought inspiration in *Hamlet*, Carlyle, Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Nietzsche’s *The birth of tragedy*⁴, he searched desperately for “hints on how to tell the story”, in places as diverse as *The sporting globe*, the Melbourne *Truth*, the Bible (the story of the Prodigal Son, *Job*, *Ecclesiastes*, Psalms 39 and 90, *Luke*), the sayings of the Buddha, the Athenian tragedians (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides), Dante, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Melville, the poetry of Shakespeare, Hardy, Campbell, Heine, TS Eliot and Henry Lawson. He also looked among the historians: Thucydides, Michelet, Taine, Marx and Trotsky.⁵

Clark wanted to tell a great story. He reflected on the Book of Samuel:

And it came to pass, when the evil spirit of God was upon Saul, that David took an harp, and played with his hand; so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him.

“My hope then and now,” he wrote, “was that a history of Australia could have the same effect on the soul of its readers as did music on the soul of Saul”.⁶

Clark’s enterprise was not to be bound by the careful equivocations of academic history, nor was his audience seen to be academic.

...when I tried to write academic history my heart was not in it. To be a “yes and no” man was not open to me. Something was missing. It was like being a blocker in cricket when temperament and interest were itching to have ago, take a risk, hook the ball off the chin for four. Don’t play for applause from the academics. Have a shot at raising your voice so that it travels “beyond the college walls.”⁷

Whatever one might think of the *History* as it was finally written, it is clear that as far as its author was concerned it was a literary work, validated (if it was validated at all) by its dramatic vision and its ability to tell a story to a general audience. With this in mind, it is interesting to compare what Clark said he was doing with what was said about his work by others.⁸ The attack on him by his publisher Peter Ryan in 1993 was a key event in the debate on the man and his work. “As the years passed,” wrote Ryan of the progress of the *History* and his own relationship with Clark,

...my valuation of both book and author went steadily downwards. I knew in my mind scholarly rigour and historical strictness were slowly seeping out of man and *History*, and that a sententious showiness in both of them, as it grew, was making the whole undertaking unworthy of the imprint of a scholarly publishing house.⁹

Ryan’s attack veered between the personal and the scholarly, but his views on the academic quality of the work were echoed from the academy and elsewhere. Mark Ellis had attacked Volume 1 of the *History* in 1962 as “History without facts”. “Professor Manning Clark”, wrote Ellis, “has done little to replace legend with sure knowledge or blind prejudice and dislike with informed and balanced appraisal.”¹⁰ In 1992, John Hirst found that in Clark’s early work (in Clark’s terms this was his earlier “yes and no”, dull, textbook history)

the dramatist and the prophet were under the discipline of the social scientist; in the *History* he broke free and if he succeeded as a dramatist or prophet it was at the expense of rendering a clear account of the history of Australian society.¹¹

Clark himself would no doubt have queried this polarity and asserted that if he succeeded in “rendering a clear account of the history of Australian society” it was to the *extent* that he succeeded as a dramatist or prophet. At any rate, it is striking that few historians seemed to have the critical apparatus to discuss Clark’s *History* in the terms he had established, “as a story...as art”. While Alan Atkinson noted that once Clark had left behind the tripartite theme of the Enlightenment, Catholicism and Protestantism the journal reviewers failed to attempt to meet him on his own ground,¹² it was left to a literary critic, Peter Craven, to point to the imaginative process that was at work in the *History*. Ryan showed, Craven wrote

little understanding of why Christopher Hill chose as an epigraph to his *Century of revolution* TS Eliot’s “All that I can hope to make you understand is only events: not what happened. And people to whom nothing has ever happened cannot understand the unimportance of events.” He goes on from the irreproachable point that mistakes are regrettable to the sweeping philistinism of “how can this professor...enter into the inwardness of heroes...?” What can we say to this? How did Stephen Crane, who never fought in a battle write one of the greatest representations of one? How did Gibbon proceed to write history? Having informed themselves as best they could, they imagined it.¹³

Two questions arise from all this. One concerns Clark himself: to what extent did he achieve in the *History* a work of “history as a story - history as an art”? In all the debate, this question, while asked, has not been addressed at any length¹⁴, nor is it the subject of this paper.

The second is about the problems of definition that Clark’s choice of form for his work raises about the nature of history as a cultural enterprise: who is it for and what does it do for them? What is its cultural role? The point is made by Ann Curthoys, speaking of George Arnold Wood’s inaugural lecture as Professor of History at the University of Sydney in 1891. Historians, said Wood, aim both to “discern and test facts, to sift evidence, to distinguish facts from fictions, to show the relationship between facts and facts”, but also to have the insight and sensitivity of the artist. “Is there,” asks Curthoys, “ambivalence at the very heart of the historical enterprise?”¹⁵ Clearly there is, and it lies at the very heart of the debate over Manning Clark’s *History*. Given

Clark's expressed aim to project his vision "beyond the college walls" to a general audience, it also prompts one to ask about the philosophical basis of professional historical work outside the academy. This is not just a matter of defining the role of historians in shaping public policy, since in the end, public policy is based in cultural values. The issue is the extent to which history has a distinctive role in defining these.¹⁶ To explore this we need to look for a moment at the history of historiography, first in Europe, then in England, and at how history came to be defined not as a cultural pursuit but as a form of professional practice

In the view of Lionel Gossman, eighteenth century historiography

did not present itself as an objectively true and therefore compelling discovery of reality. On the contrary, its truth and validity were always problematic, provoking the reader's reflection and thus renewing his freedom. In an important sense, therefore, historical narrative and fictional narrative were constructed in fundamentally similar ways in the eighteenth century.¹⁷

One thinks of Henry Fielding's *The history of Tom Jones* and its separation of comments directed to the reader from the narrative.

Moreover, accuracy, while important, was less so than the vision of the work. Voltaire, for example:

distinguished between the value of an intelligible model - which fiction can presumably be as well as history - and merely factually true accounts. "We have to make distinctions among the errors of historians. A false date, a wrong name, are only material for a volume of errata. If the main body of the work is otherwise true, if the interests, the motives, the events have been faithfully unfolded, we have a well-made statue which can be faulted for some slight imperfection of a fold in the drapery".¹⁸

Gossman goes on to argue that all this changed in the nineteenth century as historians sought to establish the professional integrity of their field of study by denying the problematic nature of their enterprise:

The dominant feature of both fictional and historical narrative in the nineteenth century is the replacement of the overt eighteenth century persona of the narrator by a covert narrator and the corresponding presentation of the narrative as unproblematic, absolutely binding.... In the struggle to establish *philosophie*, in other words, the eighteenth century historian accepted his ideological function proudly; in the nineteenth century, the historian's ideological function and the rhetoric he deployed in its service were denied, in the deepest sense, since the historian himself did not recognise them.¹⁹

This revolution in historiography originated in Germany, exemplified by Ranke's claim in the 1830s that the historian's task was, as EH Carr put it, "simply to show how it really was (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*)", a battlecry taken up by "three generations of German, British and even French historians" who "marched into battle intoning the magic words '*Wie es eigentlich gewesen*' like an incantation - designed, like most incantations, to save them from the tiresome obligation to think for themselves."²⁰

As Gossman argues, in the effort to show "how it really was", concern over the nature of historical knowledge came to predominate over the problems of historical writing, as historians like Humboldt, Savigny, Ranke, Creuzer, Schleiermacher, Gervinus and Hegel sought to establish history epistemologically and methodologically as closely as possible with the natural sciences.²¹

It took time for these ideas to be adopted in England, where history was not a university discipline until the third quarter of the nineteenth century, and where the discipline as it was eventually defined did not emerge out of the native tradition. As John Vincent observes, university history

did not grow out of such epic works of synthesis as Macaulay's *History of England*, Carlyle's *French revolution* (1837), Arnold's *Rome* (1838-43), Grote's *Greece* (1846-56), James Mill's *History of British India* (1818), Milman's *History of the Jews* (1830), Finlay's *History of Greece...* (1877), HT Buckle's *History of civilisation* (1857-61) or Lord Acton's unwritten *History of liberty*. Such works were not based on universities, were not deeply concerned with archival scholarship, did not have and did not want a historical journal, and did not see, or want to see, historians as a profession. Their allegiance was to literature, and to the understanding of an educated reading public.²²

Rather, as Arthur Marwick suggests,²³ the professionalisation of history and its incorporation as an academic discipline owed most to the example of Ranke and his disciples.

The rejection of literary history was not easy or even universal²⁴, and English historians pursued Ranke's belief in the possibility of an objective historiography in the debate on whether history should be regarded as an art or as a science. The Regius Professor of History at Cambridge, JB Bury, asserted at his inauguration in 1902 that while history "may supply material for literary art or philosophical speculation, she is herself simply a science, no less and no more."²⁵ And the proposition was sufficiently longlived for RM Crawford, head of the School of History at the University of Melbourne, to be publishing on the same theme in 1947.²⁶

By 1947, however, enthusiasm for the attempt to identify history with the natural sciences had waned, but the issue remained, recast as one of history's relationship to its method. RG Collingwood, writing in 1936, the year of Crawford's arrival at the Melbourne department, found a distinction between history and science in the nature of the explanations peculiar to each. For Collingwood, the historian was concerned not only with the outside of events ("what really happened") but also the inside, the nature of the thought processes of the agents of the action that caused the event. "For history", he wrote, "the object to be discovered is not the mere event but the thought expressed in it. To discover that thought is already to understand it.....All history is the history of thought."²⁷ Interestingly in these postmodern times, EH Carr accused Collingwood of coming "perilously near to treating history as something spun out of the human brain and to the idea that 'there is no 'objective' historical truth'"²⁸, though he also saw the

historian as steering between Scylla and Charybdis, between “history as an objective compilation of facts” and “the equally untenable theory of history as the product of the mind of the historian who establishes the facts and masters them through the processes of interpretation.”²⁹

Essentially, however, with some hesitations and diversions, the professionalisation of history through its incorporation as an academic discipline was achieved by defining history in terms, not of the questions it asks, but of its method. The key to historical method was argument from evidence, what Collingwood called “the reconstruction of (the) past through documents written and unwritten, critically analysed and interpreted.”³⁰ Collingwood noted great expectations of historical method. “The success of history”, he wrote, “has led some people to suggest that its methods are applicable to all the problems of knowledge, in other words, that all reality is historical.” He did not agree, but he did suggest that while the scientific method was appropriate to the study of nature, the appropriate method for the study of “mind” (given that “all history is the history of thought”) was “by the method of history.”³¹

But perhaps the clearest assertion that professionalism in history lies in the professional historian’s relation to his sources is Geoffrey Elton’s. The duty of the historian, Elton argued, was to immerse himself in his sources, not just until he could hear them speak, but “until one knows what they are going to say next.”³² Professional history thus pursued, Elton considered,

may well involve tedium and pedantry, the main faults of the professional.... But at his worst (the professional historian) cannot fail to add learning, understanding and knowledge; he contributes truth. Thus, good or bad, he feeds the mind, while the amateur satisfies the senses.... He is doing a job and producing results; the amateur is having fun.³³

Elton was less clear about the *purpose* of the historian’s work. The past, he thought, should be studied for its own sake. “There is”, he said, “an emotional satisfaction of a high order to be gained from extending the comprehending intelligence to include the past.”. This disinterested pursuit of knowledge about the past served a useful cultural purpose, since

a good many people simply want to know about the past, for emotional or intellectual satisfaction, and the professional historian fulfils a useful 'social' function when he helps them to know better. This might be supposed to reduce the historian to a mere entertainer, but in fact it gives him a cultural role: he contributes to the complex of non-practical activities which make up the culture of a society.³⁴

There are, of course, many problems with this. There is, to begin with, little sense here of the interaction between audience and practitioner which drives the cultural process: the sense of culture which underpins this formulation is a curiously passive one. Again, there is little sense of why "a good many simply want to know about the past": what do they do with the knowledge? Why is it important that they have it? What about the idea that history is about knowledge: what role do ideas play in this? And rather than being a non-practical activity is not cultural production an intensely practical affair? What does it mean to say that any form of cultural production is non-practical: does this mean it is useless?

Nonetheless, Elton's model of historical professionalism is well suited to the academic environment, offering as it does a quantifiable measure of historical achievement. It is a straightforward matter to ask if an historical argument is supported by the evidence adduced for it. It is a lot harder to ask if it enlarges our sense of life. This is not to say that those who have presided over the development of this sense of the historical enterprise have always been fully persuaded of the value of its results, as a look at the Australian context for these developments demonstrates. The career of Max Crawford, professor of history at the University of Melbourne from 1936 until 1972 is a useful case study. Stuart McIntyre, speaking of Crawford's legacy to the Melbourne department, argues that

...if the Melbourne tradition stands for anything, then it embodies his belief that history matters and that historians, through the values they preserve and practise, can offer instruction and leadership to the society in which they live.³⁵

The problem was that, just as Elton had difficulty justifying history as a cultural pursuit, Crawford himself was not always sure why "history matters": "As he recalled, 'academic history seemed all

too often to be supremely efficient at ascertaining facts and inefficient in using them for any serious purpose.”³⁶ The issue was crystallised by the outcomes of the PhD industry, itself the product of the drive to professionalism. “All its expertise amounted to little more than ‘eunuch-like sterility’ since it lacked any vision or social purpose.”³⁷

Crawford’s own teacher, Arnold Wood, saw the aim of historical training as, not to produce more academic historians, but “to provide the student with an education that would help him to ‘live rightly’ and make him... ‘a better man and a better citizen’”³⁸ Crawford inherited this belief in history as the basis of a liberal education, fitting its graduates for a wide range of occupations beyond the university. As it happened, however, the products of the Melbourne school during his time there more often than not went to join the growing ranks of academic historians³⁹ and while Crawford voiced his unease with the increasingly narrow methodological emphases of the system of training over which he presided and its lack of “vision or social purpose”, the notion of professionalism which imbued it and was derived from Ranke and the German school in the late nineteenth century was well suited to the academic rituals of tutorials, examinations and theses by which the new generations of academic historians were produced.

Meanwhile, as academic history became preoccupied with the process of training more academic historians, in more recent years it has lost much of its focus in a melange of specialised debate on philosophical theory and new methods of enquiry. As Janet McCalman has argued, historians have become preoccupied with “practices, structures, the acts of naming, the archaeology of discourses” and have lost interest in “dramatised concepts and interpretations, in experience as lived in time.” Method becomes an end in itself, so that “the end of enquiry is to be abstraction and theory.... If there is to be a narrative, it is but a lame example of the true pyrotechnics of the theory.”⁴⁰ In the course of this, the sense of the past as a source of creativity in our cultural life has been harder and harder to discern.

At the same time, history, especially in the newer universities, is increasingly subsumed into inter- or transdisciplinary studies. “The older paradigm” of historical studies, writes Stuart McIntyre,

assumed stable boundaries of knowledge, and took as its object the training of practitioners within the conventions of the discipline, which validated its results in peer assessment. The newer paradigm is located in transdisciplinary formations, which come together in a variety of more transient institutional settings less closely linked to the teaching mission of the university⁴¹

In this way, historians, as they debate with each other on the merits of different theories of knowledge, find that they are no longer operating within an independent discipline but as members of teams engaged in area studies, gender studies, post-colonial studies, indigenous studies and the like. The resulting fragmentation of the discipline is therefore both intellectual and physical, while history declines as a subject in its own right both in the schools and in a number of universities.⁴²

Meanwhile, over the last 20 or 30 years history has enjoyed considerable growth as a cultural concern outside the universities, with burgeoning numbers of historical societies and community museums, the new power of the heritage movement, the establishment of social history in museums and the attendant growth in numbers of visitors to historical exhibitions, the popularity of historical themes in the media, and so on.⁴³ While much of this new interest is fed by “amateurs” of the kind so regretted by Elton, the closure of employment opportunities in the universities has also led to the employment of academically trained historians in many institutions concerned with servicing the new historical interest. Historians are now influential in heritage administration, in the production of commissioned histories and in museums.

The sense of historical professionalism enshrined in the notion of historical method was, as I have suggested, well suited to the practice of history in the university. In commercial terms, the product was well suited to the market.⁴⁴ However, historians working outside the universities are working within different markets and may well need to consider how far the notion of historical method is sufficient to define the standards by which they need to work in the environments in which they find themselves. What is their relationship with the new audiences for history? How do historians communicate with audiences lacking specialised knowledge of the fields of their endeavour and a proper respect for historical method as the criterion of historical achievement?

Certainly, the “professional” model of history faces a number of problems when one tries to establish it as a part of the cultural process beyond the academy. Some of these are demonstrated by the persistence of the literary tradition, which itself raises issues about the cultural role of narrative in both fiction and history, the nature of the historical production and of the response to it, both public and private.

Manning Clark’s attempt to write a history of Australia that “could have the same effect on the soul of its readers as did music on the soul of Saul” is a valuable case study in the persistence of a literary tradition in historical writing. As we have seen, his work refers back to the pre-Rankean literary historians, to the nineteenth century novelists, and, beyond them, to the epic writers of ancient literature. In doing so he was reviving a tradition with which many of his colleagues were, as we have seen, unsympathetic, but which nonetheless had supporters such as Hayden White, in whose view

history as a discipline is in bad shape today because it has lost sight of its origins in the literary imagination. In the interests of appearing scientific and objective it has repressed and denied to itself its own greatest source of strength and renewal. By drawing historiography back once more to an intimate connection with its literary basis, we will be not only putting ourselves on guard against merely ideological distortion, we will be arriving at that ‘theory’ of history without which it cannot pass for a ‘discipline’ at all.⁴⁵

Certainly, the comparison with literature is instructive, given the power of literature to communicate. At its most basic, there is the question of form. As Gossman suggests, “every attempt to devise an order different from that of pure chronicle involves an appeal to the order of art - of fictional narrative or of drama.”⁴⁶ We could add that even pure chronicles require the use of judgement, or in other words, “an appeal to the order of art”, while the demands of narrative as a form of communication are the same in history as in fiction. As Hayden White puts it,

In point of fact, history - the real world as it evolves in time - is made sense of in the same way that the poet or novelist tries to make sense of it, that is, by endowing what originally appears as problematical and mysterious with the aspect of a recognisable, because it is a familiar, form. It does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or imagined, the manner of making sense of it is the same.⁴⁷

There is also the nature of the reality created in a novel, compared to that created in a work of history. Chiding Anthony Trollope for conceding that as a novelist he is only "making believe", Henry James protests that

Such a betrayal ...shocks me every whit as much in Trollope as it would have shocked me in Gibbon or Macaulay. It implies that the novelist is less occupied in looking for the truth... than the historian, and in so doing it deprives him at a stroke of all his standing-room. To represent and illustrate the past, the actions of men, is the task of either writer, and the only difference that I can see is, in proportion as he succeeds, to the honour of the novelist, consisting as it does in his having more difficulty in collecting his evidence, which is far from being purely literary.⁴⁸

Of course, the kind of truth James means here has more to do with something which is created within the novel and is validated through the imaginative power of the work, and less with something which is really about the past, and achieves credibility by the evidence presented, independent of the "reality" defined in the novel. "As works of imagination," notes Collingwood, "the historian's work and the novelist's do not differ." He goes on to say, "The difference is that the historian's picture is meant to be true."⁴⁹ To this we might respond with James that it all depends on how far imagination is involved in the "truth" and what constitutes an event which it is appropriate for the historian to interpret. TS Eliot's distinction between events and "what happened" has already been noted⁵⁰ and is a reminder that we have been used to thinking in history of events as those happenings that have explanatory significance for subsequent economic, social, cultural, intellectual or political developments. However it is possible to admit all of this while suggesting that we might also see events as those happenings in the past that carry their own significance as enactments of human values, or that history is also concerned

with enacting the significance of past experience. A narrative which is historical can move us just as much as one which is fictional. It can have just as much cultural weight.

James's remark therefore raises a question about the pursuit of the past "as it really was", which we can now see as comprising an understanding not only of "what really happened" but also of "what it was really like", that is, the quality of the experience enacted in the event, because it is from this that the cultural impact of the work derives, and it is through this that the historian communicates to a general audience. The vehicle for the audience's response is their historical sensibility, their capacity to imagine in historical terms. In this sense, James's definition of a novel could certainly be applied to a work of history, as

...in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression.⁵¹

And his idea of what is needed to create a sense of reality in a novel could also be used as a description of historical imagination:

The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implications of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any corner of it.⁵²

Of course, whatever James might say about the aspirations of the novelist to creating a "true" picture of the past, the novel is still primarily judged by the degree to which it is internally coherent and persuasive, not by its relationship to the past as defined by sources other than itself, while as Manning Clark's experience eloquently demonstrates, professional historians will be judged by their peers according to their use of evidence available independently of their work. On the other hand, like the reader of fiction, the ordinary reader of history, who represents the historian's point of contact with his sustaining culture, only has the work itself to go on.

If we extend these ideas to the relationship of the critic to the novelist (or to any other sort of artist), we can at least say that the work of art is fully available to the reader (or viewer), who does not have to guess at parts which are absent. It is therefore available to be assessed in the light of criticism, and the criticism itself is assessable in the light of the work. The work of criticism is not a substitute for the work of art: viewers or readers can still make up their own minds about it. The “past”, on the other hand, is not immediately accessible to the ordinary reader except through the historian. In this sense the historian is both the mediator and the critic. We use the word “history” to denote both the past and the written record of that past. The historian has both to enact the past and to interpret it, indeed the process of enactment and the process of interpretation are the same: the argument about “what really happened” is only important to the extent that the work establishes the reality of its subject and what James calls “a direct impression of life”. In this sense the work of history has its own integrity, at least for the ordinary reader if not for the professional historian. As Alain Besancon puts it, “In the end, historical study produces not so much knowledge of the past, but a book, a text”⁵³, which is a statement about the human condition in its own right and must be assessed by the ordinary reader in its own terms. In these days of multimedia, the book or text might be one of a number of different kinds of production, but the point remains that the response of ordinary people is to the product, and is engendered not by specialist knowledge but by the exercise of their historical sensibility.

In this of course the historian’s own historical sensibility is central. Few historians would now argue that they are offering definitive statements about the past rather than personal perspectives, founded though these might be on the traditional apparatus of scholarship. Most would now acknowledge that they are offering not a definitive account but *their* account of the past. To this extent, the postmodernist argument has been accepted. In calling his work *A history of Australia*, not *The history...* Manning Clark, like the rest of us, recognised the new convention.

But the postmodernist argument does not of itself define a cultural role for history. The postmodern assault on metahistories, for example, is quite problematic. While the postmodern condition may be “scepticism towards all metanarratives”⁵⁴, it remains true as the literary critic Northrop Frye observed forty years ago that “metahistory, though it usually tends to very long and

erudite books, is far more popular than regular history: in fact metahistory is really the form in which most history reaches the public."⁵⁵ The success of Manning Clark's *History* confirms what all this suggests, that broad personal statements fare better with a general audience than official histories and are more in tune with the postmodern bias against "authorities". It also suggests that as well as a statement about the human condition to which the reader can respond in a process of cultural dialectic, history can offer a unifying assertion of common values in the face of the fragmentation the postmodernists discern in contemporary culture by inviting broad participation in a shared sense of the past.⁵⁶

There are both public and personal aspects to this. The role of history as an arena of public cultural production has aspects of the role of myth, if by myth we understand a unifying set of understandings about the nature of our past experience. It is true as Northrop Frye observes that "The writing of history is an art, but no-one doubts that scientific principles are involved in the historian's treatment of evidence, and that the presence of this scientific element is what distinguishes history from legend."⁵⁷ Nonetheless, the process by which stories (whether legend or history) are incorporated into the culture and become active as the source of cultural production is one of myth-making. The story becomes mythical when it is reiterated independently of the published work. As Greg Dening notes, the telling of stories, including history, is a social, as well as an academic or literary ritual, and the ritual differs from occasion to occasion. In the process, stories become shared cultural property:

The forms and structures of history differ with different expressions. A history recounted at the family dinner table is different from a history told in religious ritual. A history recited in political parable is different from a history written in a doctoral dissertation. Each type of history will have its own social rules of expression, its own criteria of objectivity. Each type of history will balance past and present in different ways. The participants in each entertainment will know fairly exactly the reactions expected of them. There will always be some claim that one type, say academic or sacred history, is "real history". Sometimes one social group might win or nearly win and "history" is declared in some fundamentalist way to be only this or that

transformation of the past. But such definitions are rarely descriptions of what is, only declarations of territoriality claimed.⁵⁸

In Australia, the most dramatic instance of this reiteration of shared narratives is Anzac Day, now the culmination of a week each year in which discussion and interpretation of the country's military history dominates all media and much conversation. Other stories become part of the folklore as well, often because of their political implications. One thinks of the Aboriginal genocide, the Holocaust, the fall of Soviet Communism. These are all areas in which dominant consensus views, or myths, are being defined in a broad cultural arena, not just amongst historians.

We need also to understand the personal impact history can have on the individual. In the same way that we evaluate the aesthetic experience we have in encountering a work of art, we need a way to evaluate the cultural impact of a work of history, by which I mean the way in which we can discover in a work of history a culturally significant experience useable in our own cultural production. Cultural production in this sense might literally mean the production of one's own work, or it might mean simply the re-forming of one's own sensibility by the engagement of the imagination, the fact that you think or feel or see differently after experiencing the work. This might happen, as I have suggested, in the re-enactment of experience in the work. There may also be a sense of it in Barthes's remark:

You can read a text for pleasure and sense... but you're finally left with a sense of enigma, a final sense which the text doesn't express or refuses to surrender, a sort of unyielding thoughtfulness. It is like the thoughtfulness of a face which tempts one to ask... 'what are you thinking?!'⁵⁹

History, of course, does not always take the form of a verbal text. Nor is it, as I have suggested, only about causal explanation: it is also about the evaluation of experience. Museums, dealing directly as they do with perhaps the most extensive and diverse audiences of all, and representing as they do a new and thriving field of historical production "outside the college walls", offer a useful case study in the interaction of history with the cultural interests of ordinary

people which may be applicable to other forms of historical production, and a useful comparison with the conventions of academic history.

History is a recent addition to museums, dating from only the last 30 years or so⁶⁰ and has taken root there to the extent that the 1992 report on the West Australian Museum could advise that “increasingly, from evidence all around Australia and overseas, the word ‘museum’ is attaching itself to human history.”⁶¹ Historians, now reincarnated as curators, work in a field which has a well developed literature on the nature of exhibitions as its distinctive form of communication, both conceptual and in terms of the process of exhibition development. At the same time, they work in a different environment from their academic colleagues. These differences concern the questions with which museum historians deal, the nature of historical production in museums, the nature of the museum audience, and of the exhibition medium.

In museums, of course, the questions are different. Museums deal with objects, and the purpose of historical research and interpretation in museums is to define a context for each object or group of objects. The relevance of this to larger, document-oriented, questions may be incidental. A 1930s gas stove may or may not tell you much about the Great Depression, but if its provenance is available it may well tell you a lot about the person who owned it. It and its owner might then become a link between the viewer and the past from which it came. Museum history has a lot to do with forging this connection between the present and the past, between people now and people then, in a way that has cultural meaning, that is, a way that stimulates the creative imagination.

Again, curators, whether of history or anything else, are not, at least in the production of exhibitions, individual operators, but are part of a cross-disciplinary team, including designers, preparators, education staff, marketing staff and so on.

Museum audiences are also different, at least from the specialist audiences often assumed for academic history. They may not know much about post-modernism or semiotics, but as human beings they will know something about the fundamental facts of our human life, of love and pain

and death. A good museum exhibition will communicate, not only an interpretation of past events, but also an enactment of past experience.

The exhibition medium is non-linear: that is, it does not expect that ideas will be communicated in a particular sequence, since museum visitors will more often than not move in different ways around the exhibition. It is also only partly verbal in content: as well as labels there are objects, images, and sounds. The information communicated by these has to do with the recreation of environment, and the evocation of ambient mood. Indeed, the placement of the visitor within an environment is an important part of exhibition craft. The exhibition therefore communicates not only information and interpretation: it communicates a sense of the past as well.

Given these differences from academic practice, there has been some uncertainty about the nature of the historical discipline as it is carried on in these circumstances. As David Fleming puts it,

Definitions are fluid, controversy is rife, and structures are lacking. In particular, there are unresolved problems about fusing the study of social history with material evidence and its interpretation, and an uncertainty about what “social history” and “heritage” actually are.⁶²

One thing history curators have in common with their academic colleagues therefore is a clear sense of how they should do what they do, but a less clear sense of why they should do it. We still need a sense of the language history curators have in common with their audience: what is the basis of the cultural communication which takes place between them? Museums have tended to approach this as a marketing question independent of the discipline of history itself, but historians in museums also need to consider what it is they want to say and to whom and why. Historians in other branches of the discipline may like to consider the same questions.

One recent commentator⁶³ has noted the power of historical exhibitions, while indicating some uncertainty about the nature of the dialogue involved:

One of the underlying points... is how powerful history in the museum can be. It is a medium (theoretically at least) open to everyone, a very distinct component of the opportunity for lifelong learning. Whether the messages are constructed in the mind of the curator and articulated through the design strategy of an exhibit, or in the mind of the visitor and explored through memory and conversation, the impressions made can be long lasting and deeply affecting.⁶⁴

In fact, as in any cultural form, it is a matter of proposition and response: the content of a successful exhibition, whether cognitive or affective, represents a statement which triggers a response in the visitor, a response which is of course itself an event in our contemporary cultural life.

There is no doubt, as Kavanagh recognises, that this conversation between the museum and its audience takes place in the context of contemporary concerns:

The histories we make are ourselves, here and now, struggling as much to understand our own predicaments and sense of self as with the ultimately impossible task of 'recovering' the past.⁶⁵

In this sense, history in the museum and the issues it enacts is "at least as much about the present as it is about the past, as much about how people feel as it is about what they know, as much about responses as it is about facts."⁶⁶

Kavanagh sees the communication between history curator and audience in terms of an interaction between history and memory:

In many ways, museums are a meeting ground for official and formal versions of the past called histories, offered through exhibitions, and the individual or collective accounts of reflective personal experience called memories, encountered during the visit or prompted because of it. History and memory meet in the collections, within the research process and within the museum visit.⁶⁷

Certainly many of the most moving experiences in museums happen in this way. At the same time, since the pasts with which museums deal often extend well beyond memory, we could add the contention of this paper, that the conversation between history and memory is essentially about the quality of experience, about not only what happened but what it was like. The role of the historian in this context is in effect to extend our consciousness of the past by incorporating a sense of past experience in present memory, thereby making it an active part of our contemporary cultural imagination. This is one way of looking at the nature of the historical enterprise in museums. It may also be a way of looking at history carried out in other contexts.

In summary, Manning Clark's *History* revives an earlier, literary tradition of historiography. It also raises a series of questions which are vitally important about the nature of history writing, including; who is it written for and what is it really about? In their pursuit of historical method as the rationale for what they do, historians have risked forgetting the cultural role of history. While it may once have been possible for historians to sustain the profession by talking to each other, it is increasingly clear that this is no longer an option. It is even more the case now that history is practised outside the universities as well as in them, that we need a sense of purpose in history that accommodates its wider cultural role, some of which may be evident in the development of history in museums. In the end, history is a cultural pursuit: it involves a dialogue with its audience, a ritual of proposition and response. The dialogue needs to be conducted in terms that have meaning, that relate to the permanent facts of our human condition. And the essential tools in this, for both historian and audience, are not only an appreciation of the evidence, but a well-developed historical sensibility which enables them to understand what, for these people at this time, it was all about.

Brian Crozier

Comment:

Comment:

-
- ¹ Alan Ryan, "In defense of 'disciplinism'", Australian Historical Association *Bulletin* 89, Dec 1999, p.12, quoting Peter Price, "History in schools – part of the problem, part of the solution", AHA *Bulletin* 88, June 1999, p.32
- ² See the debate carried out in the AHA Bulletin 87, 88 and 89 (Dec 1998, June 1999, Dec 1999)
- ³ Manning Clark, *A historian's apprenticeship*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1992, p.19
- ⁴ *Ibid* p.22
- ⁵ *Ibid* p.21-35
- ⁶ *Ibid* p.9
- ⁷ *Ibid* p.37
- ⁸ *Manning Clark: essays on his place in history*, ed Carl Bridge, Melbourne University Press 1994 offers a guide to responses to Clark's work.
- ⁹ Peter Ryan, Manning Clark, *Quadrant* 37(9), 1993, p.10
- ¹⁰ MH Ellis, "History without facts", in Carl Bridge, ed., *Manning Clark; essays on his place in history*, Melbourne University Press 1994, p.70 (originally published in *The bulletin*, 22 September 1962).
- ¹¹ John Hirst, "The whole game escaped him", in Bridge, op.cit, p.19
- ¹² Alan Atkinson, "A great historian?", in Bridge op cit, p.126. See also Stuart McIntyre's remark that reviewers of Volume 1 of the *History* found it easier to deal with Clark's scholarly method than with his vision. (Stuart McIntyre, "A pace or two apart", in Bridge, op.cit., p.23.)
- ¹³ Peter Craven, "The Ryan affair", in Bridge, op cit, p177
- ¹⁴ It is interesting in this respect that John Rickard's piece in Bridge's collection, comparing Clark with Patrick White, deals them in terms of their respective backgrounds, careers and so on: Clark's reference to *The tree of man* as a model for his own work is not mentioned. (John Rickard, "Clark and Patrick White", in Bridge op.cit.)
- ¹⁵ Ann Curthoys, "Thinking about history", *Australian Historical Association Bulletin* no. 83, Dec.1996, p.15
- ¹⁶ See Graeme Davison, "Paradigms of public history", in *Packaging the past*, ed John Rickard, *Australian historical studies* October 1991 for a discussion of the role of historians in public policy. Note also Davison's reference to the work of Hugh Stretton, especially in *The political sciences* (London 1969) and *Capitalism, socialism and the environment* (Cambridge 1976), and his recognition from this that "our histories of the past, like our forecasts of the future, depend as much upon what we value as upon what we can foresee." (p.15)
- ¹⁷ Curthoys, op.cit, p.15
- ¹⁸ Lionel Gossman, "History and literature", in Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (eds), *The writing of history*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1978, p.23
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*. pp.23-4
- ²⁰ EH Carr, *What is history?*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1964, pp.8-9
- ²¹ Gossman, op.cit., p.7
- ²² John Vincent, *An intelligent person's guide to history*, Duckworth, London 1995, p.87
- ²³ "For history in the final sense, history as a scholarly discipline, began only with Ranke and his German compatriots at the beginning of the nineteenth century". Arthur Marwick, *The nature of history*, Alfred A. Knopf, NY 1971, p.25

- ²⁴ Ibid. p.53
- ²⁵ Ibid. p.62
- ²⁶ RM Crawford, "History as a science", *Historical studies of Australia and New Zealand*, Nov. 1947
- ²⁷ RG Collingwood, *The nature of history*, OUP, London 1961, p.214
- ²⁸ Carr, op.cit.,p.26
- ²⁹ Ibid p.29
- ³⁰ Collingwood, op.cit, p.209
- ³¹ Ibid, p.209
- ³² GR Elton, *The practice of history*, Flamingo, London 1984, p.30
- ³³ Ibid.,p.31
- ³⁴ Ibid., pp.66-7
- ³⁵ Stuart McIntyre, "The making of a school", in R.M Crawford, Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey, *Making history*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne 1985, p.20
- ³⁶ Ibid., p.15
- ³⁷ Ibid.,p.19
- ³⁸ Ibid., p.8
- ³⁹ As McIntyre records, "A survey conducted in the year of Crawford's retirement [1971] found that nearly half of all honours graduates were academics." Ibid., p.19
- ⁴⁰ Janet McCalman, "Histories and fictions: reclaiming the narrative", *Australian Historical Association Bulletin* no. 84, June 1997 p.32
- ⁴¹ Stuart McIntyre, "Discipline review: History", *Australian Historical Association Bulletin* no. 83, 1996, p.4. McIntyre also refers to the report of the Gulbenkian Commission for the restructuring of the social sciences (1996) and Michael Gibbons, *The new production of knowledge*.
- ⁴² cf staff numbers, which between 1988 and 1996 declined from 27 to 19 at the University of Queensland, 28 to 14 at the University of Newcastle, and 41 to 26 at the University of Sydney. Ibid., p.5
- ⁴³ See, for example, Brian Crozier, "The historical community; or, seeing the whole elephant", *Australian Historical Association Bulletin* nos 59-60, August-November 1989, pp.53-61, and Davison, op.cit.
- ⁴⁴ For further exploration of this idea see Brian Crozier, "What they want and what they get: history and its markets", *Australian Historical Association Bulletin* nos 59-60, August-November 1989, pp.45-52
- ⁴⁵ Hayden White, "Historical text as literary artefact", in Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki op.cit, p.61
- ⁴⁶ Gossman, op.cit. p.20
- ⁴⁷ White, op.cit., pp.60-61
- ⁴⁸ Henry James, "The art of fiction", in *Selected criticism*, ed Morris Shapira, Horizon Press, NY 1964, p.51
- ⁴⁹ Collingwood, op.cit., p.246
- ⁵⁰ p.2
- ⁵¹ Ibid, p.54
- ⁵² Ibid., p.57 Interestingly, Kathleen Fitzpatrick used "The role of the imagination in history" as the theme of her Presidential Address to the History Section of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science in 1949. As Humphrey McQueen notes, "A study of Henry James was her own long-researched but never-published love child" (*Suspect history*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town 1997 p.156.
- ⁵³ Alain Besancon, "Vers une histoire psychoanalytique" in *Histoire et experience du moi*, Flammarion, Paris 1971 p.85, quoted in Gossman, op.cit.p.29
- ⁵⁴ J-F Lyotard, quoted in Appignanesi et al, op.cit, p.103
- ⁵⁵ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of criticism: four essays*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 1957, p.54
- ⁵⁶ This thought is suggested by the observation by Appignanesi et al (op.cit.) that "the discourse of Liberation Theology aims to replace Eurocentric conceptions of both modernity and postmodernity with an indigenous historical and cultural consciousness." (p.163). History offers the same definition of shared cultural values for its audiences.
- ⁵⁷ Frye, op cit, p.7
- ⁵⁸ Greg Denning, "A poetic for histories", in *Performances*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1996, p.36
- ⁵⁹ Appignanesi et al, op.cit p.75

⁶⁰ The case of the Queensland Museum is reasonably representative. The Queensland Museum was established in 1862 as a "museum of natural science" (First report of the Philosophical Society, Dec. 1862, quoted in Patricia Mather, *A time for a museum*, Brisbane 1986, p.14). No curator of Anthropology was appointed until a century later, in 1965. Progress in history and technology was even slower.

Efforts to establish a museum of technology date back to 1881, when the Museum's Board unsuccessfully asked for Government funds to establish such an institution. The matter remained a concern of the Board for much of the 1880s, following the establishment of the Industrial and Technological Museum in Victoria in 1870 and the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in Sydney in 1880. A further attempt was made in c.1947, when the Queensland Electrical Institute proposed the establishment of a technological museum in Brisbane. The proposal led to the formation of a Committee for the Development of a Technical Museum, urging the establishment of "Museum of Science, Industry and Applied Arts" in parallel with the Queensland Museum. Government support was not forthcoming, but the idea was raised again in 1963 by a number of individuals including Mr IO Marsh and Professor SA Prentice, leading to the formation of a "Queensland Hall of Science, Industry and Health Development Committee". This Committee, like its predecessor, failed to establish a technical museum, though its efforts were probably instrumental in formally establishing a History and Technology section within the Museum. (Mather, pp.222-234)

The first appointment in the History and Technology area was that of Arnold Sweetser in 1969, with the first curator of History and Technology, Dan Robinson, appointed in 1972. The first formally trained historian to be appointed to the section was Brian Crozier in 1991.

⁶¹ State Task Force for Museums Policy, Western Australia, *Into the twenty-first century*, June 1992, p.22.

⁶² David Fleming, "Introduction", in David Fleming, Crispin Paine and John G. Rhodes (eds), *Social history in museums: a handbook for professionals*, HMSO, London 1993, p.1.

⁶³ Gaynor Kavanagh (ed), *Making histories in museums*

⁶⁴ Gaynor Kavanagh, Preface, in *Ibid*, p.xiv

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.xiii

⁶⁶ *Ibid*

⁶⁷ "Making histories, making memories", *ibid.*, p.1