

Australian Studies: Australian history, Australian studies and the new economy

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I've worked nearly all my life for something which has *utterly* failed.
And moreover, we no longer *exist* in the eyes of the world.
(Edith Berry)¹

History in the ruins

Traditional universities 'struggle to come to grips with the mass education system and the many demands that are placed on them by stakeholders such as students, staff, government and business', state Coaldrake and Stedman (1997, p 29). 'The conceptual loss we have suffered through the degradation of serious conceptions of the university is partly a consequence of a conceptual loss in characterising its treasures', says Raimond Gaita, 'That is why one might fear that there is to be no comfort for those who are saddened by the demise of the serious concept of the university' (Gaita, 2000, p 29). Self-styled defeatism of this type is suggestive of deep disquiet. It seems that traditional scholarly values have been sacrificed to mammon — to the ideals of the newly created corporate university.

Should a university be a community of scholars or a degree factory? 'To compare the university to the modern corporation', Marginson and Considine note in *The Enterprise University* (2000, p 2), is as dispiriting for 'academics' as is the coupling of 'music' and 'money' for the virtuoso, or 'literature' and 'town hall legislation' for the serious poet. Such things may match, but in a manner that signals a compromised integrity. In his 'confessions of an accidental academic', *Sandstone Gothic* (1998), Andrew Reimer (1998, p 200) says that the rot set in during the 1980s. Others, affronted by 'men and women in suits' (Brett, 2000), point to the Dawkins reforms, markets and the new public managers of the early 1990s.

The complaint has become familiar: the corporate university is a dog's breakfast served at the table of the vivisector; a Faustian trade-off of traditional scholarly and pedagogical pursuits for economic rationalism and globalisation. 'We live amidst the ruins of so much that we once thought enduring', writes the professor of history Graeme Davison in *The Use and Abuse of History* (2000), 'yet with such yearnings for a sense of our bearings, that the study of the past can seem either sheer self-indulgence or the most earnest intellectual challenges of our times'. History was one of the early disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, and a cornerstone of the traditional university; but, according to Davison, 'What troubles some nationalists, and some historians, is that the History business may have begun to show a negative balance'. At one time, the study of history, Davison argues:

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seemed a sound investment, returning much more in patriotic fervour, national *esprit de corps* and wise statesmanship than it did in heart-searching and unexpected liabilities. Now, it seems, it is all burdens and no bounty, all boos and no cheers.

(Davison, 2000, p 9)

‘Why’, Davison goes on to ask, should keepers of the public purse ‘continue to subsidise’ an academic discipline that does not broadly cohere with government policy? ‘Have historians let us down or is it History itself that is to blame?’ (Davison, 2000, p 1). In this chapter I make some preliminary observations on the place and status of Australian history and Australian studies within the configuration of the ‘new university’ and the new economy, and assess the implications for graduate studies.

The purse, the politician and the practice of history

Australian history, Davison argues, is subject to the vagaries of politics, perhaps more so than other areas in the social sciences, quite simply because it reflects on the very issues at the heart of the electoral fortunes of the politician. If, as it is sometimes wryly observed, economics is politics taken seriously, it remains a truism understood by all politicians that the control of (national) imagery and perceptions, as much as sound financial management, is the agenda-setting benchmark of governments and governments-in-waiting. National history is charged with associations of national character, and all political parties contest and seek to win advantage over one another by promoting interpretations that stand a chance of being accepted by significant sections of the electorate.

Politicians not only manufacture historical truths for their own ends, they manipulate and exploit available history in an effort to be validated in the eyes of their supporters and, more broadly, the voting public. While interpretations of history under the aegis of invention and manipulation, as Davison points out, can vary widely, the political regimes that most effectively control the past and speak its presumed certainties to the broadest number of people quite obviously control the present. Conversely, voters punish severely politicians whose history has passed its use-by date or who simply get it wrong, in the judgement of the electorate.

If politics is the art of the possible, it is also the craft of manufacturing consent. History teases the political imagination — John Howard developed a vastly different historical understanding of Liberal Party founder Robert Menzies than did Malcolm Fraser; Paul Keating professed a hatred of Menzies but viewed Labor hero John Curtin differently to Bob Hawke. In the arena of politics, the past is not so much a foreign country as an intimate and contested present, reshaped with each successive new government. In the 1990s, political brinkmanship took history to new levels of intensity.

In 1996 Howard successfully appealed to the ‘battlers’ — historicised in the political imagination as ‘disinherited’ Australian who had been ‘silenced’ by the ‘alien’ influences of ‘political correctness’ and the historical sectarianism of the ‘true believers’ under Keating. ‘One of the more insidious developments in Australian political life over the past decade or so’, Howard argued in 1996, ‘has been the attempt to rewrite Australian History in the service of a partisan political cause’ (Davison, 2000, p 5). By restoring the balance, as he saw it, Howard reconstituted a

version of Australian history that had been set aside by Keating. But seeming is not always being, and in his own way, Howard was every bit as partisan as his immediate predecessor.

Yet, is it reasonable to make a connection between political vision and the fate of history as a practice or profession? In the politics of 'thrills and spills', Keating may well have inspired those academic historians whose views he proffered as a new orthodoxy. According to Davison, the economic rationalist treasurer of the 1980s used history during the period of his prime-ministership of the 1990s as a convenience in rounding out his political personality. The 'undertaker' with the five o'clock shadow became the 'big picture visionary', the Placido Domingo of a new Australian history.

For the period of his incumbency, Keating appeared to have history within his keeping in the form of a profound reinterpretation of Australia's past brought on by the *Mabo* judgement, which acknowledged native title. As *Mabo* exposed the 'legal fiction' of *terra nullius*, so it brought into being a version of Australia's history that Keating was only too prepared to mobilise for his political ends. A successful push for an Australian republic could achieve a similarly transforming effect as the Prime Minister trained his sites on the history of the second world war. In Keating's Camelot, the chief speech-writer and image-maker, Don Watson, was a professional historian recruited from the academy. Dr Watson was responsible for writing some of the former prime minister's most notably historical speeches, including the Redfern address about Indigenous people and the eulogy accompanying the repatriation of the skeletal remains of an 'unknown soldier' killed during the first world war. In other domains, Keating drew on the work of David Day and Manning Clark while arguing the case for an Australian republic.

'Today's rooster is tomorrow's feather duster' is a political maxim observed by all politicians. Their challenge is to stare down, as long as possible, inevitable defeat. Keating seemed to know this better than most. He had, after all, grown up on the lap of Jack Lang. But even Keating seemed to be genuinely seduced by the rhetoric of a new Australian history. It was an exhilarating time for those in the history profession. Some might even claim that, to a considerable extent, the prime minister was their creation.

As the succeeding prime minister, Howard was keen to seal political advantage by castigating the historical and ethical bankruptcy of the vanquished. In the politics of retribution, both within the electorate and the parliament, Howard would claim that Keating had failed to properly interpret Australia and the Australian people. He had, according to Howard, abused the 'true purpose of History' and 'read History backwards, imposing on the past a pattern designed to serve contemporary political needs'. In Howard's view, it was cowardly history that sought to 'demean, pillory and tear down many great people who had no opportunity to answer back'. (Davison 2000, p 5). It was a history, though Howard did not say this directly, that facilitated the rise of Pauline Hanson and One Nation because she, like her supporters and the new Prime Minister, was so appalled at the Keating view: 'No, I really don't like it'. If historians had put in their lot with Keating, their day of reckoning had surely arrived.

Howard attacked Keating's 'excesses', including *Mabo* and the republic, by imputing a conspiracy of secular elitism embedded within the academy. He castigated the left-leaning exclusiveness of university historians to good political effect. Already

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rattled and uncertain about the future of the academy under the pressure of imposed reforms, a myth of persecution could very easily be sustained among historians. As the electorate turned to Howard, historians felt singled out in the prime minister's skilful deployment of the phrase 'the black armband view of History', coined, it might be added, by one of Australia's most decorated academic historians, Geoffrey Blainey. Howard's repudiation of the 'stolen generation', a term attributed to another historian, Peter Read, and his questioning of the validity of the official report detailing the systematic removal of Indigenous children, *Bringing Them Home*, was at one and the same time a political manoeuvre and, at its best and worst, an exercise in historiography, the 'judicious' use of evidence, and the 'reasonableness' of interpretation. Importantly, like Keating, Howard's arguments concerned the application of an historical past and its meaning into a political present where it took shape and gained significance.

It might reasonably be asked, if Australian history has been so central to the fortunes of political elites — Kim Beazley, is a voracious consumer of national and military history — why have academic historians not fared better than they seem to have done of late? Despite sometimes close alignment of historians and governments — Watson on one side and Blainey on the other, for instance — the reorganisation of the tertiary education sector, much lamented by sections of the profession, seems to have had very little to do with the 'reputation' of Australian history as a scholarly or intellectual undertaking. Rather, 'reform' of the education sector as a whole, is an issue for all governments. No special dispensation has been accorded to history, whose fortunes are determined within a narrower context of the institutional politics of the university.

The corporate and the civic

By the 1980s, Australian history was one of the strongest areas within the discipline of history as measured by enrolments, research output and numbers of staff and students. The diminishing fortunes of history into the 1990s corresponded to the reorganisation of the university sector. One of the primary disciplines within the social sciences, history became old and vulnerable. It was top-heavy with ever-decreasing numbers of new recruits to replenish the ranks. As staff aged and reduced in numbers, undergraduate enrolments plummeted. Postgraduate enrolments remained strong for a time but began to follow the downward trend.

According to Davison, questions surrounding Australian history are entangled in the 'pervasive utilitarianism of our age':

When every academic program is ranked according to the salaries of its graduates it is not surprising that History too ought to be judged by its usefulness. The 'bottom line' and 'cash value' have become the ruling standards of public as well as private good. Historians are often caught in the dilemma of whether to contest such standards (and implicitly concede their 'usefulness') or to fight utilitarians on their own ground.

(Davison, 2000, p 9)

But how well do academics understand the changes so affecting them? According to Marginson and Considine (2000, pp 234–35), those at the lectern and at the PC tend to possess only a rudimentary understanding of 'their university at the organisational

level, or of the main considerations motivating managers'. Hardworking but preoccupied with the 'day-to-day demands' of being members of academic staff, historians have tended to respond to 'what little they knew of that bigger picture with an all-too-easy cynicism'. According to Coaldrake and Stedman (1997, p 4), 'it is perhaps little wonder that a large number of academic staff feel alienated':

Many academics pride themselves on the enduring nature of the university as an institution, one that provides almost monastic stability in a world of change. While there can be strengths in stability and tradition, universities cannot remain aloof from the expectations and needs of society. This is especially so now that universities are no longer catering for an elite, and are being weaned from an almost total reliance on government funding. (Coaldrake and Stedman, 1997, p 6)

Universities do still cater for an elite, but the band has broadened to take in a wider range of studies. Stuart Macintyre and Simon Marginson (2000, p 15) have critiqued the utilitarian model by positing a positive case for the civic, as opposed to the corporate, university. At the same time, they caution against any tendency within the sector to nostalgically recall the values of the traditional pre-corporate university. While conceding that the shift to the 'new market-oriented, semi-public enterprise has thrown in doubt most of the expectations associated' with the 'operation' of older-style institutions, they suggest that it would be muddle-headed to argue for a return to earlier versions of tertiary education, which were elitist and selective. From the point of view of arguments against managerialism, 'some of the most cogent criticisms of present university policy' have a tendency to be self-referential' and, by imputation, self-indulgent and, in many instances, even self-defeating:

They draw out the educational and intellectual consequences of turning higher education into an industry, the inequities, the wastage of talent, the degradation of standards, the threats to intellectual freedom. They are far less likely to establish the public implications of this transformation. With their attention fixed on what they know best, they treat the university as a closed system, its contribution to larger society as self evident. (Macintyre and Marginson, 2000, p 52)

But history was challenged for other reasons. As the educational sector changed, the disciplines came under the pressure of new areas of intellectual inquiry. The rise of cultural studies, for example, perhaps not unrelated to the reorganisation of the sector, had dramatic implication for history. Australian history retaliated by investing in interdisciplinary 'Australian studies'.

Reinventing Australian history

Australian studies programs were first introduced into Australian tertiary institutions in the 1970s with the establishment of the first chair of Australian studies at Deakin University in 1977, and with the inauguration of centres at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (now Curtin) in 1974 and the University of Queensland in 1978. The area, though, was a long time in the making: among networks of writers, artists and intellectuals not associated directly with the university system; from the 1960s onward within the university system, in particular, departments of English and history, and more broadly the humanities and social sciences.

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The emotional and intellectual climate of the 1980s tended to encourage a growing national confidence and questioning of Australia, inside and outside of the academy, in the lead-up to the 1988 bicentenary. Anniversaries are only significant to the extent that they are observed, but 'celebration of the nation' was supported by huge capital inducements offered by governments, including monies set aside for the official bicentenary history project, published ultimately as *The Australians* by Fairfax, Syme and Weldon. Interestingly, these volumes were outsold by the more modestly produced *People's History of Australia*, edited by Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee, published by McPhee-Gribble.

This bicentennial mood had significant implications for the articulation and delivery of Australian-focused programs within tertiary institutions. Around this time, a chair of Australian history was established at Sydney University. The Committee to Review Australian Studies in Tertiary Education published two reports, *Windows onto Worlds: Studying Australia at Tertiary Level* (1987), which recommended the Australianisation of Australian curricula, and *Australian Studies Overseas* (1988), which catalogued Australian studies programs off-shore. The Australianisation of curricula did not proceed, and some actively questioned the call for affirmative action for Australian studies as being a narrowing of curricula.

As a direct result of the CRASTE reports, the National Centre for Australian Studies was established at Monash University, funded by DEET and the ARC Key Centre Infrastructural Grant, and was headed by Australian historian Peter Spearritt. By the end of the 1990s, the funding had run its course. A downsized Monash centre still called itself national but was now part of the School of Political and Social inquiry. The founding of the Australian Centre at the University of Melbourne in 1989 was, in part, a response to the establishment of the Monash Centre. Griffith University also appointed a chair in Australian studies. It abolished its school of Australian and comparative studies in 1996/7 in a general restructuring of humanities and was followed in this soon after by Deakin. In the early 1990s a centre for Australian Cultural Studies was established at Canberra and programs in Australian Studies were introduced at the ANU. In 2000, Curtin University appointed a chair within the Division of Humanities, and the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Queensland was restored as an interdisciplinary centre across the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences.

While Australian studies might have given confidence that Australian history would hold its own in an environment that seemed to be becoming increasingly interdisciplinary in focus, the area had to fend off charges that it was promoting a 'billy tea' tradition of Australian nationalism. That Australian studies grew out of Australian history and its main partner, Australian literature, gave the area considerable status, but the coupling left it open to charges that it was little more than a repackaging of older disciplines. A general absence of geography, politics, economics, sociology, music and specialisations such as immigration and multicultural studies was noted.

In 'A small serve of spaghetti' (1991), Meaghan Morris wrote: 'I've always been a bit ambivalent about Australian Studies, which has often struck me in practice as an inward and backward-looking discipline'. In 1994 Turner repeated his 1991 criticism: 'The great intellectual failure for Australian Studies as a discipline, or as a convergence of disciplines, is that it has progressively resisted invitations to self

examination, to theorise just what it is that Australian Studies thinks it is doing'. He picked up these threads again in 1996 but went on to argue that Australian studies and cultural studies should explore common ground instead of propagating an antagonism that has grown up between the two. While there may remain some reservations about Turner's argument, his general point that Australian studies and cultural studies are cognate areas signals an accord that may yet further affect Australian history.

Cultural studies was a growth area of the 1980s and 1990s. It took root first in post-1975 institutions where traditional disciplines such as history were not taught, but soon spread into the sandstone universities. In *Challenges for the Social Sciences* (1998), Stuart Macintyre underscores, without naming directly, the influences and challenges of cultural studies on traditional disciplines such as history. The 'reorganisation of the profession', he writes, is a 'primary feature of disciplinary developments over the past twenty years' (Macintyre, 1998, p 130):

History is constituted as a disciplinary department only in the universities established before 1975. The newer universities, and especially the post-secondary universities raised to university status during the 1980s, do not maintain History departments. Some, such as the Australian Defence Force Academy, Murdoch and Edith Cowan, offer History programs, and most employ historians in multidisciplinary schools, departments and units; but their teaching and research duties are typically in interdisciplinary fields, such as, gender, leisure, tourism and heritage studies.
(Macintyre, 1998, p 130)

Speaking more broadly, Macintyre observes a parallel transformation in graduate training. 'The older paradigm' governing the social sciences 'assumed stable boundaries of knowledge, and took as its object the training of practitioners within the conventions of the discipline, which validated its research in peer assessment'. Newer paradigms are now 'located in transdisciplinary formation, which come together in a variety of more transient institutional settings less closely linked to the teaching mission of the university' (Macintyre, 1998, p 130).

Those who dominated the domain of cultural studies at century's end generally undertook their postgraduate research within traditional disciplines. By the 1990s, cultural studies was claiming discipline status in its own right, by which time it had to contend with the impression that it had transformed from being an innovative and perhaps even subversive academic practice to being as conventional as the disciplines it had once challenged. One of cultural studies' most influential late developments in cultural policy is very orthodox indeed — either critiquing or advising government cultural policy.

If professional historians came to disdain that cultural studies stole business and students from the disciplines, they were also critical that cultural studies specialists understood only imprecisely the rigors and discipline implied by the study of history. On a second front, historians argued against rampant amateurism outside the academy, particularly among genealogists and local historians. Davison has outlined the non-professional tendency at the expense of professionalism. More broadly, the once highly regarded professionalism of the discipline has had to cope with an expectation that is anything but: 'I look after the past', says Derek Baker, Historical Society Volunteer in an advertisement for the Commonwealth Bank, 'The bank helps

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me look after the future'. As Tom Griffiths has eloquently argued in his award-winning book *Hunters and Collectors* (1996), the discipline of history owes something to the antiquarian imagination, but to suggest that volunteers look after the past would be an outrage to most established and next-generation scholars.

As cultural studies ignored history and amateurism flourished unabated, university history departments shrunk in size. Some, such as the University of Western Australia, were reduced by half the number of staff who had graced its halls only a decade earlier. Where once Australian history had been a major undertaking at the Nedlands campus, there was now only one academic historian with an Australian specialisation. Moreover, the UWA had made only one new full-time academic appointment in history from the decade to 2001. Of its ten academic staff, four were full professors, four were associate professors; there was one senior lecturer and one lecturer. At the University of Melbourne, around half the staff listed are at the level of associate professor or professor; while at the University of Queensland a similarly top-heavy department of history was amalgamated in 2001 with philosophy, religion and classics, in a general restructuring that finally ended its independent disciplinary status.

Cultural studies and Australian studies, as suggested by Macintyre and others, have had an impact on traditional studies in history. The decline of history coincided with the emergence of both, and there is a tendency to see a causal relationship between them. No doubt there have been enrolment losses in a flow to cultural studies, which is galling if historians feel that their specialisation is being taught badly or inadequately by non-specialists with very little proper sense of the discipline. More recently, cultural studies commentators, while maintaining a fundamental objection to empiricism, have identified a need for graduates in the area to be better historians. That history as a discipline may be in a state of decline is similarly registered in school curricula, where it is taught increasingly as one component of other studies. For example, 'studies on society and environment' was introduced to the Queensland state school curriculum in 2000. At the other end of the scale, publishers are less and less likely to take risks with scholarly monographs on history because they don't sell in the book marketplace unlike, for instance, biography, which is sought out by an otherwise voracious reading public.

Independent scholarship

For all the reasons associated with its decline, a typical market analysis of history might suggest that universities are wilfully creating an oversupply of unwanted labour. Within this context, anecdotal evidence accumulates of sweatshop-type conditions for contract, part-time and sessional staff drawn from postgraduate communities. The emergence of the 'freelance' intellectual discussed below may be conceptualised as the clearest evidence of this overabundance. Evidence is also growing that graduate students are dissatisfied with the arrangements for the execution of their research degrees.

As the knowledge industry concentrated within the academy, academics became increasingly professionalised in the fifty years following the second world war. Over a similar period, historians responded to changing circumstances by casting off their 'quiet academic gloves' and wearing 'stronger boots' (Tawney via Hancock).² By the 1980s, Australian historians could boast a leading role in the development of

strengths in sub-disciplinary areas such as social history, contact history and women's history. More recently, however, they have had to fend off competition, very often from outside the university sector — pollsters and think tanks to name but two — and this has created pressure on the status of the profession. Universities have 'played a central role in providing access to knowledge, creating knowledge, and fostering learning in students to enable them to use knowledge', observe Coaldrake and Stedman (1997, p 1). 'However it is not true that the university is the only type of institution capable of undertaking these functions'. The future bespeaks greater not less competition.

Arguably, a defining characteristic of scholarship has been that of the independent researcher. Eifion Murphy (1999) argues that graduate studies on Australia imply both individual scholarship and civic responsibility. 'The pursuit of learning and the acquisition of knowledge involve what has been referred to as civic responsibility', she maintains:

It might be supposed, therefore, that education and scholarship connect in important and direct ways with citizenship in that they imply the rights and obligations of all citizens to critique and better understand the worlds of their lived experience.

Like the classic role of the public intellectual, citizens engage in the 'production, transmission and adaptation of ideas about society and culture'. The conditions of citizenship may well demand that we all be 'intellectuals' of one type or other, but clearly we are authorised to 'speak our minds' to a very 'uneven extent'. Not everyone belongs to what might be called the 'knowledge class', those whose principal occupations involve specialist analysis and interpretation (Murphy 1999).

While major debates may revolve around corporate versus civic cultures within the university, another tension has developed at the level of postgraduate candidacy, between the ideals and obligations of independent scholarship and those of the civic or the corporate university. What roles do graduate historians play, especially in circumstances of diminishing employment prospects?

The stakes for independent research scholarship are high for the PhD candidate. But where once the PhD was a training ground for academia — it remains the basic requirement of any academic appointment — increasing numbers of postgraduates have little likelihood of securing permanent academic employment. Arguably academic departments and individual supervisors have been slow to react to this new reality. Supervising strategies continue to be carried out on the principle of preparation for the academy — even when there is a general acceptance that only a proportion of completing students will end up employed in their area of specialisation. It is not that enrolling departments are unaware of the problem — they are in fact acutely aware of it — but the dual pressures of almost irreconcilable opposites: a widely held belief in the integrity of independent scholarship on the one hand and economic necessity to maintain enrolments on the other has resulted in a widespread complicity of silence on the subject of postgraduate training. Indeed, the term 'training' may appear to be anathema to the ideals of the university. For related reasons, current academic training practices may seem a waste of time for the burgeoning communities of postgraduates with little or no hope of fulfilling the traditional objectives of the PhD to get credentialed for academic employment.

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This contradiction is captured eloquently in Elizabeth Ruinard and Elspeth Tilley's introduction to the 2001 'New Talents 21C' production, *Fresh Cuts* (2001), an annual publication by the University of Queensland Press through the API Network that exclusively features graduate work in Australian studies. 'We have chosen the title *Fresh Cuts* for this edition of New Talents for several reasons', say Ruinard and Tilley (2001, p 1):

Firstly, to reflect the originality and diversity of thought in this salad-bowl collection of fresh, cutting edge ideas by new writers; secondly, to refer to something far less positive — the fresh cuts to funding and resources faced by postgraduate researchers on an almost daily basis nation-wide ... assessment of postgraduates has increasingly moved from appraisal of their current and future worth to appraisal of their cost. Postgraduates are being redefined from a resource to a burden.

(Ruinard and Tilley, 2001, p 1)

But, Ruinard and Tilley go on to say, it is simply not good enough for graduates to rely on the support of understanding members of the academy: 'Postgraduates must promote their own worth and trumpet their own achievements ... sadly, for whatever reason, there seems to be a distinct reluctance to do just that' (Ruinard and Tilley, 2001, p 1).

A standard scholarly PhD thesis in history is a sustained work of research and writing that takes between three and five years to complete. It is an intense undertaking commonly characterised by the isolation of the candidate. Although there is evidence of support networks and, in some instances, coursework supplements provided and run by academic departments, the primary relationship is that between the candidate and the supervisor. This is a deeply personal and sometimes troubled relationship.

The road to hell is paved with bad supervision

A basic requirement of postgraduate candidacy is that independent research shall be supervised. Such a requirement that independence be monitored is an uneasy tension at the heart of the research undertaking. The supervisor is a powerful presence in the life of any thesis, and stories of bad supervision are legion within graduate communities. These may be embellished and apocryphal, but they recur frequently enough to suggest that current arrangements may need to be reviewed. The only formal qualification required for supervision is that the supervisor be credentialed by having completed a degree to equivalent standing as the one being undertaken by the candidate. Beyond this, a supervisor requires no formal training in being a supervisor, though institutions are beginning to offer voluntary classes and advising sessions for supervisors. Inadequate supervision was a major issue for a focus group of Australian studies postgraduates convened by the API Network in mid 2000.

'Four supervisors', one postgraduate confided, 'the third always wanting to steer me in a different direction each time we met, never remembering where I'd even been. That is, whenever we got to meet'. Another candidate was 'currently in a good student-supervisor relationship but the last one was ridiculous, dodging each other in

corridors, etc. On the odd occasion that a meeting could not be avoided he/she referred me to Aristotle/the entire History of Western literature/culture'. Almost inevitably the question of provenance arose:

The only supervisor I ever had who was intimately connected with my work became so intimately connected that they thought it was their idea and published a paper. Yes, I complained. And I wasted about six months and made a lot of enemies doing it, and it wasn't worth it, and I wouldn't complain again in the future. I even had a legal opinion supporting my claim to plagiarism but the investigators (departmental and therefore not independent) had another, more senior academic, writing a report denying plagiarism. I was told by student union officials that they receive at least three to four complaints every week about this type of thing — yet nothing ever goes further than that.

Another respondent outlined the difficulties experienced at the point of enrolment, identifying a suitable supervisor:

On the topic of picking supervisors, no there aren't enough safeguards. I was allocated a supervisor who, when I'd packed up house, family and moved to take up my offer, didn't really want me. Turned out to be a 'dud', so new supervisor in six months. She was really just filling in until my real supervisor was appointed.

The supervisory relationship is developed over a sustained period of time and can be positive: 'I'm lucky to have a good supervisor and we have a good relationship but I guess I mentioned this point because I've heard of many who aren't so lucky'. According to this admission, adequate supervision is a matter of luck and not good management on the part of the provider, the university and the relevant department. 'Very important point', responded another, 'Is it fair that it's just "luck of the draw" whether you get a good supervisor? ... For a new postgrad in a new institution, how the hell do you know who to pick? And what do you do if you get a "dud"? Are there enough safeguards?'

Good and bad stories are liberated by just such questions, but the general impression among postgraduates seems to be that supervision is a lottery characterised by bad practices. Very much like Alice in the 1996 Australian film *Love and Other Catastrophes*, one member of the focus group became entangled in a 'bush, diving behind it to avoid a supervisor hell bent on having me delve into psychoanalysis — six months work for a footnote to explain why I'd rejected such an approach'. At this rate there will soon be more candidates than available bushes, so what is to be done? 'We really need to be able to view a register of supervisors', was one recommendation, 'yes, their publications but also the number of successful completions they've supervised and the number who've not completed'. 'Here's my rant':

Someone on the transcript called for postgrads to be assertive with their supervisors. But it shouldn't be up to individual postgrads to be individually assertive on a one-to-one basis every time something goes wrong — what a waste of energy, and by the time everything goes wrong it's too late. Postgrads should be collectively assertive in order to get rules and regulations in place which protect their rights as a group ... So here's my incredibly impossible long wish list for postgraduates. None of it will ever happen, but hell, why not ask for the sky, we might get some leftovers. Wish list for postgraduate life: to be

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recognised as being less jaded, less preoccupied with administrative bullshit and less busy scrambling around the now disgustingly corporatised ladder of academe than so called 'proper' academics, and therefore capable of much more creative writing, much more in-depth research, much more cutting edge thinking, etc, etc, etc — and therefore be rewarded with, oh say for example, maybe scholarships that actually last the length of the average postgraduate degree, and/or guaranteed access to teaching experience ... guaranteed input from a supervisor (all supervisors should be regularly tested to see if they can summarise their students' topics — I'll bet a lot can't ... a structure in which it actually somehow benefits supervisors to have students doing interesting work — the only way it seems to benefit them at present is by enriching their own rapidly dwindling stocks of innovative thought.

Inept and incompetent supervisors loom large in such 'raves'. But a number of respondents saw fault with the institutions. Supervisors and candidates 'vary so dramatically in motivation and commitment', observed one, who went on to ask whether the 'current structures' were 'benefiting both/either to the max'? There is a huge diversity in the kinds of attention that supervisors give postgraduate candidates, the respondent said, and also "the system" doesn't seem to have any way of recognising those supervisors who do make a great contribution at this level, from those who leave candidates to find their own way through a dissertation'.

To what extent does a supervisor intervene in a graduate's work? Many supervisors will confide that this will depend on the nature of the candidate, meaning that some candidates are 'high maintenance' while others are effective independent researchers. The paradox thus emerges. The student-supervisor relationship is construed in professional terms. Its dynamics, however, are worked through in personal terms. 'The fact that the supervisors and students vary in aims, commitment etc', observed a respondent, can result in positive outcomes: 'this fiction can sometimes create a more critically sound piece of work because of the constant to-and-fro process involved. If the aims, motivations are so different that things become unworkable then the solution is simple — get another supervisor'. Back to the essential paradox of matching up personalities to resolve what may well be a professional impasse.

Electronic celebrities

The study of Australia as an area of scholarly specialisation has tended to be more than a specifically intellectual undertaking for many Australian academics. In the face of ever-present vagaries surrounding notions of individual research and scholarship, 'Australianists' have enjoyed a decided advantage over other area specialists in being able to assume and to some extent enjoy the role of a knowledge elite, quite simply because of the immediacy of their subject matter. Despite alleged community suspicions about academic, those possessing Australian expertise are consistently called upon for explanations of how Australian society functions. Under these conditions, Australian historians have acted as public commentators and cultural and social arbiters. While their opinions are by no means gospel, they have been authorised by virtue of their university employment. Their specialisation on Australia has made them a sometimes significant and sometimes influential group.

An aspect that may be observed is that contemporary research scholarship is 'much more like a form of self-employment', according to the executive dean of humanities at Queensland University of Technology, John Hartley. Hartley told an assembled group of graduates in the School of Media and Journalism in mid 2000 that research scholars have to 'organise their careers as a form of minor celebrity' (Hartley, 2000). He explained:

You should act as if you are self-employed, you are freelance, and have to maintain a reputation. You have to promote yourself a bit. You have to network. You have to toady. You have to manage an academic career as a form of self-presentation and self performance. That is to say you have to attend conferences, you have to develop your publications and research track record, and you have to carry that around with you. Instead of just doing study because it is interesting and then moving on, you have to spend most of your career actively monitoring your career, and writing down what you have achieved in a form that can be presented to a potential employer. It is a form of self-employment, a form of freelance work. There is a lot of work for academics, but perhaps not careers in the full industrial sense of working for a single employer for very long periods of time. There is a turn in the world economy which academics would do well to take seriously and that works for and against us. ... There are problems for academics who believe they are a world apart ... It is an environment of research, information processing, knowledge creation and content provision rather than a world in which the intellectual stands against society as independent of society.
(Hartley, 2000)

Academics may equivocate on the use of 'celebrity'. The term does have a certain hyperbolic acceleration about it, but the proposition captures an essential reality of the new circumstances in higher education in Australia. That said, professional historians are not overly represented within the great consumer demand for history outside of the academy. On the basis of influence measured according to consumption, film, television and novels have a far greater spread. The sales figures of historical novelists such as those by Morris West, Colleen McCulloch, Thomas Kenneally and Bryce Courtenay, for example, almost certainly exceed the combined sales of the academic production of history.

Geoffrey Blainey and Henry Reynolds are historians who take the profession seriously. They command a wide audience across Australia — and both have been influential in public debates. They are publicly visible on account of their output and book sales, but they are also regular performers in the print and electronic media. In Hartley's terms they may reasonably be thought of as 'celebrities'. Characteristically, celebrities emerge out an industry to achieve ready identification and recognition by a broader, non-specialist, audience. We tend to think of celebrities in terms of creative industries such as radio, film and television. But they appear elsewhere — sporting figures such as Cathy Freeman and Susie O'Neill, 1980s entrepreneurs such as Bond and Skase, medical doctors such as Fred Hollows, Brendan Nelson, Geoffrey Eddleston, members of the clergy such as Reverend Ted Noffs, chefs such as Stephanie Alexander and Mr Filthy, and even politicians such as Pauline Hanson.

It is sometimes difficult to get academic historians to think beyond the academic article or the next monograph. 'Diligent readers will have noticed that in recent issues

Investing in Social Capital

the journal has been attempting to elicit comments in the form of “Communications”, wrote the then editor of *Australian Historical Studies*, John Rickard (1993, p 1) almost a decade ago:

The response has been less than overwhelming. Whether this is because *Australian Historical Studies* has too austere and academic an image for the more informal exchange of views, or whether recent articles have simply not been sufficiently unorthodox to provoke comment, is difficult to say. I continue to hope that the shyness might be overcome.

(Rickard, 1993, p 1)

Either the historians themselves or their subject of inquiry were not worthy of comment.

Ruinard and Tilley (2001, pp 1–2) note a similar situation when reporting the details of one of their peer’s attempts to solicit manuscripts at a postgraduate conference for a refereed postgraduate journal: ‘Every speaker, and every delegate, received a flyer advertising the call for papers, yet not one submission was received by the editors’. They go on to say:

Perhaps postgraduates themselves already half believe in the doctrine that they are ‘only trainees’; anecdotally, this seems to be the case ... The excuse that is most often given for not seeking publication, or otherwise seeking opportunities for self-promotion, is that there ‘simply isn’t time’. With or without a scholarship, but particularly without, it not easy to finance study and simultaneously produce top quality, in-depth research. ... the need to disseminate that research through conferences, publications and various channels of interaction with the wider community becomes a lower priority than generating an income and actually getting the degree finished. But without dissemination, without a determined effort to promote and market postgraduate output as original, valuable and important, postgraduates are left with few bargaining tools and little evidence to support their case.

(Ruinard and Tilley, 2001, p 2)

Given the lack of confidence, the output of postgraduates is spectacular. According to Alan Lawson (1999), dean of postgraduate studies at the University of Queensland, postgraduates produce between half and two thirds of published research in the humanities and social sciences.

If we consider for a moment high-profile Australian historians such as Blainey and Reynolds as celebrities because they are widely acknowledged outside of their profession and because they are readily deployed by the media, then we may also accept that there are lesser-known professionals in the area doing substantial work but without the same degree of recognition. Professional historians within the academy are ranked according to the specifications of their institutions. While standards may vary between universities, the employment categories are standard across the sector. Such historians may not be so readily identified outside of their profession but they are assessed — rewarded and penalised — by a system of professional and peer review.

Undoubtedly, the media is a player in the construction of celebrity (Turner *et al.*, 2000). Behind the emergence of celebrity figures are entire industries where the ‘almost famous’ try out. Into this loop we feed the tantalising prospects of the new economy. ‘The new world of social and commercial interaction, brought about by

advances in information technology, has come to be called the information economy', according to the Commonwealth government's *Towards an Australian Strategy for Information Economy* (1998), 'a major shift in the way we live and learn and work has begun in Australia. It is part of a global change — the coming of the information economy'. While it remains true, as Ian Lowe (2000) has observed, that half of the world's population has never made a phone call, advanced capitalist, post-industrial, technologically rich societies such as Australia are undergoing profound changes on account of the 'information revolution'.

Arguably, the first stage of the information revolution was what is usefully termed 'connectivity' and the establishment of the new electronic pathways that fundamentally altered communications throughout the world. The next stage is content-driven, or what Terry Flew and Stuart Cunningham (2000) have referred to as 'value adding through digital distribution'.³ According to Manuel Castells (1996, p 32) in *The Rise of the Network Society*, the 'significance' of the technological revolution is now not simply the linking of networks across the world but the 'application' of both 'knowledge and information to knowledge generation and information processing ... in a cumulative feedback loop between innovation and the uses of innovation'.

University education across Australia has moved into a new phase in which the 'public university' had become a 'publicly assisted university'. Under these conditions, graduate students have been advised to organise their careers around an expectation that they may work for several employers in several domains over a lifetime. 'Portable skills are the marker of opportunity', Hartley (2000) maintained, 'If you can not only do your job for your employer, but make what you do legible and transferable to other possible employers, you are looking more like an enterprise — freelance'. Hartley was keen to impress upon graduate students that even a 'real job' as a tenured academic is perhaps not worth aspiring to: 'The pay is lousy and the conditions are lousy, everybody hates you'. Among other things, academics are socially maladjusted with a terrible dress sense. 'The actual conditions are sometimes unspeakable so I do not speak about them'. Given that, is it surprising that graduate students, after years and years of study, would wish to pursue an academic career.

Many will equivocate on Hartley's use of celebrity, but the movement toward the freelance intellectual is undeniable. The transposition of a single word can invoke entirely different and perhaps even new meanings. From the freelance to the public intellectual, the new economy presents remarkable new opportunities for Australian public intellectuals. They will need to survive on their wits alone often, without a stable income or an established career trajectory, but by insinuating themselves into the new economy via the superhighway they are well placed to take account of these new opportunities. As the appetite for content increases under the driving power of the information revolution, they will need to slough off their quiet gloves and their stout boots to become cultural entrepreneurs. Their employment future does not reside within the university sector, which is unable to recruit them, but they will, in time, become powerful rivals for the core business of universities. It is possible that they will be very much better knowledge providers.

Conclusions

Economic rationalism has had a massive impact on the higher education system, effecting sometimes profound changes on the delivery of Australian history within the university sector. As history departments have aged and grown smaller, they have become top-heavy, with fewer students. Importantly, the delivery of a standard PhD degree is no longer appropriate for the circumstances of the new economy: firstly, because the PhD was devised to equip graduates to become academics and there simply are not the jobs for these graduates within the university system; and, secondly, because the employment needs outside of the academy are vastly different to the training given to graduates within the university sector.

The new economy presents new and expanded opportunities for graduate placement, as the information revolution moves from connectivity to content. In order to take advantage of these new opportunities, graduates will be required to learn a range of skills outside of the specialisation of their teaching department but which will complement their skills base away from the university. Very few departments or supervisors possess the necessary expertise to teach new economy skills directly but will need to invest in them in order to make their programs relevant. No doubt there will be resistance to this suggestion, but Australian history graduates exiting from Australian universities will require minimum skills in the areas of design, graphics and publishing. They will also need to be prepared to be able to research, write and present not only scholarly history but history that can be applied outside of the profession and the sector. There are outstanding opportunities for universities to place their graduates into the new economy, but only if a change of in mindset can be effected.

If graduate studies in history once required stronger books, they now require lateral thinking and clever application in the new economy. The sector as a whole, as a matter of utmost urgency, needs to rethink the links between scholarship, mentoring and training. History will need to undertake a review of its research degree requirements and move these into an orientation that allows their graduates to practice being historians in the wider community while making good use of their skills and knowledge into the new economy.

Universities are dynamic institutions and will go on making a contribution to knowledge and scholarship, but there have been fewer better opportunities for the social sciences than right now. Revolutions sometimes affect vested interests badly and older-style academics will rail against my suggestions as heresy. But they do no discernible service by defending the indefensible.