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The intriguing dance of history and fiction

Abstract:

In this essay I explore the common ground of history and fiction, suggesting that they are a tag team, sometimes taking turns, sometimes working in tandem, to deepen our understanding and extend our imagination. But I also argue that there are times when the distinction between them is vital, and that it is incumbent on historians – on those who choose at certain moments to write history – to insist and reflect on the difference. I hope to create a context in which such explanations will not be misinterpreted as defending territory. In the course of the essay I refer to historians who write fiction and novelists who write history, and I draw especially on the work of the novelists Eleanor Dark and Kate Grenville, poet and historian Judith Wright, and the historians Inga Clendinnen, Grace Karskens and Ross Gibson.

Biographical note:

Tom Griffiths is the WK Hancock Professor of History at the Australian National University. He is also Chair of the Editorial Board of the Australian Dictionary of Biography, Director of the Centre for Environmental History at ANU, and a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. His books and essays have won prizes in literature, history, science, politics and journalism, including the Eureka Science Book Prize, the Prime Minister's Prize for Australian History, the Douglas Stewart Prize for Non-Fiction, and the Alfred Deakin Prize for an Essay Advancing Public Debate. He is the author of *Beechworth* (1987), *Hunters and collectors* (1996), *Forests of ash* (2001) and *Slicing the silence: Voyaging to Antarctica* (2007). Among his edited volumes are *Ecology and empire: Environmental history of settler societies* (co-edited with Libby Robin, 1997) and *Words for country: Landscape and language in Australia* (co-edited with Tim Bonyhady, 2002). His most recent book, co-written with Christine Hansen, is *Living with fire* (2012). He was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2014.

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No more foolish question was ever asked than the one so frequently hurled at writers of fiction: 'Do you draw your characters from life?' In Heaven's name, what else is there to draw them from? (Eleanor Dark)

In 2007 I gave a first-year English lecture at the Australian National University on Peter Carey's novel, *True history of the Kelly gang* (2000). Near the end of the lecture, a big man in a Kelly helmet burst into the lecture theatre brandishing a gun and shouting 'I'm not fiction!' He grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and dragged me out of the theatre, my arms flailing helplessly and my papers scattering from the lectern.

I was almost as stunned as the students, but not quite. 'Ned Kelly' was my good friend and fellow scholar, Darrell Lewis, who I had happened to bump into on campus that morning. Darrell is a great admirer of Ned and possesses a full replica of the armour and has been known to wear it at ceremonial events with impressive effect – although people had begun to notice that he and Ned were never in the same room at the same time. Darrell is a strong bushman and has a deep, gruff voice, and also happens to be a brilliant historian (see, Lewis 2012, 2013). Anyway, that morning I had mentioned to Darrell that I would be giving this lecture and wouldn't it be fun if Ned interrupted it? He agreed but said that unfortunately he had another commitment. So when a man burst into the back of the theatre, shouting, I was surprised and annoyed to be so rudely interrupted. That, and the fact that Darrell roughed me up as he dragged me out, *and* that he really does dislike Carey's fictionalisation of his hero, made it a pretty convincing intervention. I thought he had gone too far with the realistic wooden gun, and it must have got very close to causing a security lock-down.

I was invited to give the lecture as a historian, to give historical context to the setting of the novel. The last thing I wanted to do for students of literature was to commentate on the way the novel departs from known facts. Of course it does. I was much more interested in the independent power of the fiction, the game that Carey was playing with 'truth', and the role of history in stimulating the author's imagination. I was interested in the responsibilities a novelist takes on when they portray a real historical person or event and re-imagine them freely. Inga Clendinnen argued in 'The history question' that novelists don't have a moral contract with the past in the way that historians do (2006: 32). But she also recalled Peter Carey winning her heart at the Brisbane Writers' Festival when he responded to relentless historical questioning about his *True history of the Kelly gang* by sinking in his chair and saying 'I made it up'.

But the thing is, he didn't. Peter Carey carried Ned Kelly's Jerilderie Letter around for years, fascinated by its intensity, and his book is not only a reworking of a real historical person, it is also a conscious extrapolation of a real historical document. The stakes are high. I think Carey, because he trades in the power of a well-known past, invited and expected commentary on historical grounds as well as on literary ones. He expected us to evaluate the authenticity of the voice and his ability to get inside the famous helmet. He is playing with a past that he knows we know – indeed, our

independent knowledge of the ‘true’ history provides the grounds for his game. And I don’t think he could have written that novel until Ian Jones (1995) had written his biography of Ned Kelly and, equally, I think we cannot now write the history of the Kelly Outbreak without learning from the extraordinary ventriloquism of the novel. This intriguing dance between history and fiction is my subject.

Historians and novelists do not constitute inviolable, impermeable categories of writers. Some historians are also novelists and many novelists are also historians. Historians write fiction and novelists write history: Judith Wright, Thomas Keneally, Drusilla Modjeska, Roger McDonald, Helen Garner, Barry Hill, Tony Birch, Shirley Hazzard, David Malouf, Peter Cochrane, Ross Gibson, Delia Falconer, Peter Stanley, Alexis Wright and Richard Flanagan, just to name a handful. Novelists adopt the devices of non-fiction in their novels; historians tell stories with mystery, imagination and style. They are all creative artists who are conscious of something significant when they change genres and, thankfully, they often reflect upon it.

In this essay I will explore the common ground of history and fiction, suggesting that they are a tag team, sometimes taking turns, sometimes working in tandem, to deepen our understanding and extend our imagination. History doesn’t own truth, and fiction doesn’t own imagination, but sometimes the differences between history and fiction are very important indeed. And it is incumbent on historians – on those who choose at certain moments to write history – to insist and reflect on the distinction. I hope to create a context in which such explanations will not be misinterpreted as defending territory.

The novelist Eleanor Dark was probably Australia’s most influential historical writer in the twentieth century. Her trilogy of historical novels, especially the first volume *The timeless land* (1941), was widely read, studied in schools, and was selected for the Book of the Month Club in the USA, which made it a best-seller. Dark did not claim that *The timeless land* was history. Her preface began: ‘My aim has been to give a picture of the first settlement of Sydney, which is always true in broad outline, and often in detail, but I make no claim to strict historical accuracy either in my dealings with the white men or the black.’ The original first sentence in her earlier draft (which appears in some later published editions) was: ‘This book has borrowed so much from history that it seems advisable to remind readers that it is fiction’ (Dark nd(a)).¹ When her novel was published in late 1941, readers and ‘newshounds’ wanted to know about the book *and* they wanted to know about Australia’s past.

Eleanor Dark’s house in the Blue Mountains, known as Varuna, is now managed as a writers’ house, and some years ago I had the good fortune to work there. I absorbed the hauntings of Dark’s garden writing studio, and I relished the opportunity to browse in her home library. One day I noticed a brown-paper-covered volume hidden at the far edge of a locked bookcase. When I was able to retrieve it, I discovered it was Eleanor’s annotated copy of *The timeless land*. In the margins of the pages, she had footnoted her fiction. This fact, she wrote, was from David Collins’ account, this

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one from Watkin Tench's narrative, this event was described in the Governor's despatch, this interpretation of Aboriginal society was drawn from Threlkeld, and that from Professor Elkin. She had wanted to get it right.

Her working days in the writing of the book were like those of a historian, with trips to Sydney and long hours with the archive shaping her routine: 'To town in morning & worked at Mitchell. Lunch in gardens, Mitchell in afternoon' (Dark 1939).² She had a loose-leaf book for her research notes, organised chronologically, a page for each date, with the action or event noted and the source recorded. Another notebook recorded customs and traditions of Australian Aborigines, organised alphabetically into sections on 'Ceremonies', 'Kinship' or 'Language'. Eleanor was captivated, but she also felt the burden of this scholarly mission, 'a type of mental effort which doesn't come naturally to me' and which ultimately left her 'with a sort of loathing of my desk' (cited in Brooks & Clark 1998: 263). She later corresponded with staff of the Australian Dictionary of Biography, offering corrections to entries and drawing their attention to 'a curious mistake' in the *Historical records of New South Wales* (Brooks & Clark 1998: 361). Her fiction was disciplined with referenced facts, too disciplined some of her readers and critics thought of the later books in the trilogy. As the historical novels took over her life, she became a slave to her respect for past reality. I agree with James Bradley that we mustn't value fiction for its non-fiction: we 'mustn't make research the thing that matters about fiction' (2006: 72-6). But it is significant that, for Dark in *The timeless land*, facts were her foundation and she wanted to imagine into and within the known past.

Her quest was as much historical as literary. Dark found herself sickened by the complacency of Sydney's celebration of the sesquicentenary of British settlement in 1938. Aborigines, convicts and women were forgotten or suppressed in a triumphal national story that celebrated white free male pioneers planting the flag on a virgin continent (for three wonderful studies on Dark's writing, see Brooks & Clark 1998, Wyndham 2007, & Modjeska 1984). Professional historians, the few who existed, were doing little to unsettle this complacency, applying their expertise mostly to imperial history and situating Australian history as a footnote to it. Eleanor Dark wanted to write a more radical historical account, one from the inside, looking out from her eucalypt escarpment in the Blue Mountains towards the swelling tide of invasion. Her novel began with an Aboriginal man, Wunbula, and his son, Bennilong, standing on an eastern headland scanning the horizon, looking for the return of the great ship with wings, the one that had visited briefly years before. It was a stunning imaginative leap from the ships to shore, to the view from the edge of the trees.

Dark was decades ahead of Australia's historians in realising that the big story about British colonisation at Port Jackson was that of the encounter between settlers and Aborigines. When Manning Clark set out on what he sometimes called his 'journey without maps' and began writing his multi-volume *A history of Australia*, one of the few scholarly influences he acknowledged was Eleanor Dark's novel, *The timeless land* (McKenna 2011: 232-3, 252). In 1946 he and Dymphna visited the Darks at

Varuna and left inspired, and in 1948 Manning invited Dark to lecture to his history students at Melbourne University, a visit remembered by one of his students that year, John Mulvaney. In 1963, Clark sent Dark a copy of the new edition of volume 1 of his *A history of Australia* with this explanation: ‘The reason for this is that if there is any value in the work at all this comes in part from the inspiration in reading *The timeless land*, and I would like you to accept the book in gratitude for all that I owe to your own work’ (Clark 1963). Peter Ryan (1993) recalled that Clark’s picture of those early years of British settlement was drawn largely from Dark’s novel. Yet Clark’s own histories remained relatively impervious to the cross-cultural human drama that Dark had researched and explored. Such was the power of disciplinary thinking even on a maverick such as Clark. History became professional and academic in the late nineteenth century by developing a science of the document and servicing the increasingly powerful nation-state, itself a generator and organiser of documents. It was aligned with literacy and nationalism, and enforced a rupture between history and prehistory, civilisation and ‘the primitive’, humans and animals, and culture and nature (Shrylock & Smail 2011: 3-20). The Dark side of Clark remained, at that time, outside of history.

When historians in the 1970s caught up with Eleanor Dark’s imaginative leap and themselves began to investigate ‘the other side of the frontier’, one of the first frontier histories to be written was by a poet, Judith Wright. Wright was arguably Australia’s best known and most admired poet of the twentieth century. From the 1940s her poems quickly entered the national literary consciousness; her poetry was popular and critically acclaimed because of its distillation of white pioneer mythology. Yet she was to become a critic of that inheritance. In the drought, war and deep cold of the winter of 1942, in the year following the publication of Dark’s *The timeless land*, 27-year-old Judith Wright returned to work the land of New England on which she grew up. One day she and her father searched for an old track leading from the coast to the tableland and happened upon a sheer cliff called Darkie Point near Point Lookout, where they had often camped as a family. Her father told her that this had been the place where, in revenge for the killing of cattle, a whole group of Aboriginal men, women and children had been driven over the cliff (Wright 1991: 29-30). Her father’s story, as Wright recalled, ‘had sunk more deeply into my own life than he would perhaps have liked, and was to influence me forever’ (1999: 165). Judith Wright composed a poem about it, which she called ‘Nigger’s Leap, New England’. In that poem, she asked: ‘Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers,/ and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?’ She began at this time to write a novel based on her family history, but it would be another decade and a half before she completed the story of her forebears that she called *The generations of men* (1959). Although she drew on the 23 surviving volumes of her grandfather’s diary and on her grandmother’s reminiscences, it was a ‘semi-novel’ that Wright eventually wrote, and it glowed with a gentle nostalgia. *The generations of men* told the twin stories of the

relationship between Wright's grandparents, May and Albert, and of their battle with the land.

In the 1970s, Wright was embroiled in intensive political campaigning for Aboriginal land rights and was a foundation member of the Aboriginal Treaty Committee. This committee, led by 'Nugget' Coombs, 'called for a Treaty, within Australia, between Australians'. In words that sound like Judith's, the Treaty Committee lamented that there was no 'documentary recognition of the quality and courage of those who were conquered' (cited in Rowse 2000: 176; see also, Wright 1985). The Treaty would be concerned not only with land rights, but also political rights. The adversarial context of Wright's campaigning created a need for a different kind of writing, something that would go beyond metaphorical or poetic truth; she needed words that would be legally and historically defensible. Judith had to turn the powerful poem about 'Nigger's Leap, New England' into a coolly researched and verifiable history of the frontier.³ So, twenty years after the publication of her novel, Wright returned to her family story and turned her romantic pastoral saga into a dispassionate and deeply researched history called *The cry for the dead* (1981). Her book would give a secure scholarly foundation to the political campaign of the Aboriginal Treaty Committee. Her alternative working title for *The cry for the dead* was *A right to the soil?*

I think this turn to history is a fascinating moment in the career of a great writer. Wright needed unique, grounded and localised truths that she could go out and do battle with. She had to be able to show that this happened exactly here, precisely then. So this poet and one-time writer of fiction then chose history as her art for conveying truth.

When her activism quickened (from the 1960s), her poetry was judged to have suffered. One characterisation of her career is that she sacrificed her writing for her politics. Her politics not only stole time from her writing, but it was also perceived to diminish the quality of what writing she could do. But I think there has been insufficient attention paid to the new kinds of writing she *was* doing. The 'two fires', the two passions that burned within her, were art and activism, and one way that Wright came to reconcile them was to choose a different kind of art, that of history. Poetry and politics came together to produce disciplined non-fiction.

So Wright set about becoming a historian (see, Griffiths 2006). She had always sought a peripheral status as a writer, institutionally as well as geographically. Yet, just as she found the university useful in the early stages of establishing herself as a writer, so in the late 1970s did she again court disciplinary knowledge. She read her way through squatting history and local Queensland pioneering chronicles. She was especially interested in the new work on the frontier being done in the 1970s by Raymond Evans and Henry Reynolds. She read Reynolds' book, *The other side of the frontier*, in manuscript, and it was published in the same year as hers. Alongside this historical scholarship, she was reading texts in Aboriginal anthropology, both old and new – AW Howitt's *Native tribes* (1904), Edward Curr's *The Australian race* (1886-1887), the work of AP Elkin (who had once been her teacher), and more recent work by John

Mulvaney and Jack Golson on *Aboriginal man and environment in Australia* (1971) and Mulvaney and Bernie Joyce's archaeological work at Kenniff Cave, as well as scientific perspectives that emerged in the 1960s on Aboriginal burning regimes. She also read Claude Levi-Strauss as she tried to find ways to empathise with, describe and understand a different civilisation, looking for intelligent contrasts between hunter-gatherer societies and her own. Above all, she trawled the regional archives and newspapers. 'My reading and research', she wrote, 'took me into dark places, into which historians are only recently beginning to throw some light' (Wright 1981: 4).

She told her publisher, Frank Eyre:

If you had any idea of the quantity of notes, books, documents, archival documents, etc I have consulted or of the size of my card index and the amount of material I have copied, you would be taken aback. Poor Kathleen Fitzpatrick's struggles over Sir John Franklin had nothing on mine. I have had to educate or re-educate myself in not only history, but anthropology, ecology, geography, geology – you name it ... May Hell admire me, as the bushrangers used to say, but I wished often I hadn't taken it on at all! (Wright 1980)⁴

As the author's lens drew back, the ghostly Aboriginal figures of her poems and the alien creatures of her novel came into focus as a people. The dark shapes haunting the brigalow and the puzzling individuals helping May in the house and Albert on horseback became *the Wadja*, a people with culture and history, the long-term inhabitants of deeply-known country who also defend it fiercely from invasion. As historian Graeme Davison observed, 'The union of land and lineage that [Wright] celebrated in her own forebears' history is now relocated to the Aborigines they dispossessed' (2000: 95). Gone was the earlier view that Aborigines offered little resistance. The intruding whites also came into a different focus. Wright's history offered a view of them through Aboriginal eyes: as a race with few women and almost no children, as a people defiant against the laws of sharing, building elaborate structures of wood and stone in which they shut themselves away, and constantly, ruthlessly, breaking the body of the land (Wright 1981: 26-7). The balance of the narrative shifted a little earlier into the 1860s, the decade of most conflict and tension on the south-east Queensland frontier. May Mackenzie, the central figure of *The generations of men*, did not appear in *The cry for the dead* until two-thirds of the way through. Albert now became the main character but he shared the stage with other white men trying to wrest a living from the land – and *their* preoccupying relationship was with the Aboriginal people. And the Wadja did not just fade away: as late as the 1870s, Albert Wright recorded a gathering of about 500 Aborigines on the banks of the Dawson (23). On another occasion, May Wright wondered 'why they did not kill us all, they were so many and we so few' (195).

With her new eyes and purpose – with the change in her politics and art – Judith began to embed the story of her grandparents in a broader cross-cultural and environmental narrative. Her main characters, no longer larger than life, shrank back to size and became figures in a landscape. This adjustment of focus allowed other

figures, hitherto very much in the background, even ghostly, to be rescued from our peripheral vision and to claim our central attention. There was an uncompromising directness about her prose; it became ‘thicker, darker, heavier’ (Roe 1982: 2-4). As historian Michael Roe put it, the sublimated sorrow of *The generations of men* was turned into active pain and anger (2-4). Wright became an elegant slave to fact and context, rarely venturing beyond what she found in the record, yet always enlarging the telling with interpretive insight and context. Albert and May were transformed from warmly imagined and semi-fictionalised ancestors into slightly distanced and partially known historical people in a dynamic landscape. Their personal curiosities, concerns and consciences about Aboriginal society, which were portrayed in the earlier book, were now used to analyse these anxieties more broadly in settler society. The adjustment of focus from interior lives to the broader landscape of colonial experience better illuminated the shifting terrain between private and public in frontier culture. In relinquishing the semi-fictional form, some elements of her storytelling were lost: we miss the novelist’s confident access to thoughts and feelings. But other dimensions were gained: the story had greater gravity and a wider canvas, and uncertainty and silence became a part of the narrative.

As Inga Clendinnen has said of the writing of history: ‘Were this fiction, I would know that all things said and left unsaid, all disruptions, were intended to signify. But this is not fiction, and I cannot be sure’ (1998a: 58-78). So the moment Judith Wright chose history, she enabled herself to speculate meaningfully about silences. So her grandfather’s diary became more than a mine for the novelist: it was transformed into a finished but incomplete artefact, a piece of evidence whose gaps must be tested. In the summer of 1868-69, there was violent conflict over the possession of waterholes in south-eastern Queensland. Drought had deepened and, during a trip to Mackay, Albert heard of renewed conflict. He recorded tersely in his diary: ‘About sixty Blacks were shot at Grosvenor last week’. In that month of January, Albert – who seldom missed filling in his diary entries unless sickness prevented him – found himself condemned to silence for three whole weeks.⁵ There is an uncharacteristic and long gap in his diary. ‘What happened during that time,’ wrote Judith, ‘and the reason for that silence, can only be guesswork’ (1981: 152). But the art of history enabled her to make the silence powerful.

By the late 1990s, frontier conflict had become accepted in historiography and there was a conservative backlash, seeking to discredit it. Conservative critics initiated a fight over footnotes, equating official reports with truth, mimicking the scholarly method without the morality, and sacrificing meaning for accountability – and countability. As if counting the precise number of Aboriginal and settler dead on the frontier decided the ethics of the issue! As if such a count could ever be certain or definitive in any case. As if history was just about discrete gobbets of fact. I think it was the moral vacuum created by this critique that invited, indeed demanded, works such as Mark McKenna’s *Looking for Blackfellas’ Point* (2002), Inga Clendinnen’s

Dancing with strangers (2003), and Kate Grenville's *The secret river* (2006), all published in the early 2000s, and all stories that aimed to remind us of the intimacy and familiarity of the frontier, of its visceral, violent reality, and also of its alternative human possibilities. These three books, two of history, one of fiction, sought to enlarge our capacity for compassion, to win back ground for tolerance and understanding (for further critique by a historian, see Hirst 2005).

Grenville's commentary on her novel addressed this context directly. 'The voice of debate might stimulate the brain', she declared in 2005, 'the dry voice of "facts" might make us comfortable, even relaxed. It takes the voice of fiction to get the feet walking in a new direction' (2005a: 16-18). I think that Grenville's phrase 'the dry voice of "facts"' referred not to history generally but quite specifically to the aridity of the 'counting the dead' debate, and her words 'comfortable, even relaxed' gestured to Prime Minister John Howard's refrain about how he hoped Australians would feel about their past. And it's likely that Grenville's hope that fiction might 'get the feet walking in a new direction' alluded to the Walk for Reconciliation across Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000 which was a stimulus to her own writing about the frontier. Her hunger for a new direction in the adversarial political debate was widely shared – and the solution she offered was 'the oblique voice of fiction'.⁶

To Grenville's frustration, she found herself talking about history and fiction rather than frontier violence. And to her surprise, she found herself criticised by the very historians she might have expected to share her political quest, especially the two whose books had been shaped by the same public conversation (Clendinnen 2006; McKenna 2005: 96-110). She expressed dismay and a sense of betrayal. In an interview with Grenville in August 2011, Miriam Cosic described Grenville as 'blindsided' and quoted her saying:

it was the year when Keith Windschuttle and the massacre denialists were in full throat, the people who said, "Nothing happened, they all just died of measles, isn't it sad". And when my book came out, I had all my answers for those people. I'd done a lot of research – Henry Reynolds is a mine of fantastic information about it. And then it [the criticism] didn't come from them. It came from people who, I would have thought, politically are on the same side (Cosic 2011).

The media likes to present a discussion as a 'spat'. My own words in *Australian Book Review* in 2006, welcoming Grenville's novel in the terms I've outlined above, were overlooked in surveys of the debate at the time. In 2007, in preparing for a Sydney Writers' Festival event called 'Making a fiction of history' (not our title), Inga Clendinnen, Roger McDonald and I, as well as the chair Elaine Lindsay, respected Grenville's personal request to leave her out of the discussion. Nevertheless, the *Australian* reported 'a renewal of hostilities' (Hope 2007). On Radio National, our gentle, good-humoured dialogue was described as 'locking horns', and the ideas were said to be 'quite hotly debated'.

I think that Grenville herself fuelled the 'fuss', as she called it, by trying to control the debate and by focussing on her own feelings. Encouraged by a media interested in

personal and adversarial stories, she was unable to resist making it all about her – how misunderstood she was, how hurt she still is, how resilient she has proven. She found it painful and said it was all unfair. She constantly returned to the issue, unbidden, and then resented that it had resurfaced. She still wages the war on her website (2005b). Alternative interpretations of her words were deemed ‘radical distortions’; her critics ‘had an axe to grind’. In Miriam Cosic’s 2011 interview with Grenville, Cosic referred to ‘public attacks on [Grenville’s] personal integrity and professional ethics’.⁷ I can’t recognise the criticism in these descriptions.

That Grenville felt hurt is beyond doubt. But her response reduced a potentially rich discussion to a narrow, literal dispute about whether or not she said that her novel was history. This distillation of the debate enabled her to dismiss the discussion as ‘phoney’ and to position herself as a champion of fiction. Historians are easily depicted as pedants or curmudgeons defending their territory against imaginative incursions, whereas novelists are generally celebrated when they do research. Criticism by historians of Grenville’s remarks about her novel were soon simplified, even by some historians, as sorties in another kind of ‘history war’ – a ‘turf war’.⁸ Misleading oppositions were generated between scholarship and imagination, truth and fiction, and history and feeling.

‘History’ turned out to be a rather mischievous and elusive word in the debate. I now understand from correspondence with Grenville that, with reference to *Searching for the secret river*, she makes a distinction I wouldn’t make between ‘story-telling history’ and ‘the discipline of History’, and between ‘writing true stories’ and ‘writing History’.⁹ Here is surely a source of some of the confusion. I accept that Grenville never intended to claim her novel as a work of history, although I don’t think that was ever the issue. And I don’t agree with Clendinnen that novelists ‘have been doing their best to bump historians off the track’ (2006: 16). However, I do believe that Grenville was legitimately embarked upon a historical quest, much as Eleanor Dark and Judith Wright were, and that she found herself drawn into public conversations about the past, history and sometimes even ‘History’ in ways that she encouraged and felt were an important dimension and contribution of her novel. And why shouldn’t she? Grenville didn’t shrug her shoulders like Peter Carey and say that she had made it up. ‘I haven’t made it up’, she explained, ‘I just put a novelist’s flesh on the bones of the documents.’ She wanted to talk about the past, and about the influence of the past in the present, and she ‘wanted the book to be based at every point on whatever historical veracity I could find’. ‘I’ve taken the skeleton out of the cupboard’, Grenville declared. She felt ‘very passionately that the book is probably as close as we are going to get to what it was actually like’ (all quotes in Sullivan 2005). Furthermore, as historian Sarah Pinto has observed, Grenville ‘articulated what amounts to an historical methodology’, which is to gain access to the past through re-enactment, experience and empathy, and by ‘going back into the unconscious’ (2010: 185).¹⁰ ‘I didn’t have to approach the past in a forensic frame of mind. I could *experience* the past – as if it were happening here and now’, wrote Grenville (2008: 47). One of the unstintingly generous dimensions of Grenville’s work is her

commitment to explaining what she does, whether in terms of telling stories or researching the past (see, Grenville 2010; Grenville and Woolfe 2001; and Grenville 2008). It is these explanations, verbal and written, that draw comment from people who research and use the past in different ways. Perhaps because her historical methodology is so personal and intuitive, commentaries on the method could feel like a personal attack.

‘Fiction’ as a genre was less scrutinised in this debate than was ‘history’. Perhaps it was because Grenville’s social realist style of fiction – with its earnest, psychologically transparent and empathetic relationship to the past – is rather close to the orientation of traditional history. But many novelists don’t work with history in such a direct and transparent way, and they allow more room for the power of fiction itself to dramatise silences and uncertainty, to transform and morph reality, and to resist narrative closure (Falconer 2006).¹¹ Peter Carey’s shrug was convincing for the very reason that the magic realism of his novels conjures a relationship to the past that is playful and irreverent. In a rich and thoughtful contribution to the debate, novelist James Bradley felt that Clendinnen ‘comes close’ to assuming that novelists who tackle historical subjects are drawn to those subjects purely by a desire to recreate the past. He worried that such a view fosters ‘the notion of historical fiction as something closer to fictional documentary than fiction in any sense’ – and Bradley thus concluded that it was fiction and not history whose cultural authority might be in decline (2006: 75-6).

Grenville had expected and wanted a debate with the conservative critics of frontier conflict. But the targets of conservatives at that time were historians, and the debate was about the precise, grounded, evidenced truths of history. In order to be a combatant on that ground, you needed time, place and specificity, just as Judith Wright had found in the battle over land rights in the 1970s. Grenville’s ‘oblique voice of fiction’ offered a new direction precisely because it was *oblique*. It was not a work of logic and argument, and it was never going to attract the counting-the-dead conservative critique because it didn’t deal in contextual, documented truth. By ‘pillaging’ the past, as she put it, and by moving incidents out of time and place, Grenville distilled a parable. ‘This is a story about all settlers, and settler psyche, in all places, throughout the colonial period’, historian Grace Karskens said of Grenville’s novel (2009: 13-14). *The secret river* was taken intravenously by its reading public and was, I think, a timely, powerful public intervention in exactly the way Grenville must have hoped.

But Grenville’s method, which contrasted with that of Eleanor Dark’s contextual historical fiction, left her outside the political debate, to her clear frustration. In her public commentaries, she seemed to want it both ways – to wield the oblique power of fiction *and* the cachet of a researched past. She wanted to join the game of history but to play by different rules. It’s not surprising or unreasonable, then, that historians would voice opinions about her historical methodology, as set out in her interviews and memoir, especially at a moment in public culture when they constantly had to

defend their craft and explain the sources and methods of good history.¹² Thus Grenville unwittingly found herself in the middle of a debate that goes to the heart of the discipline of history, that matters very much in public affairs, and that is fundamentally not about her.

A year before the controversy broke, historian Iain McCalman predicted it. ‘One of the unexpected casualties of our current History Wars’, he wrote in 2004, ‘may be a forced cooling of relations between fiction and history writing’ (151-61). McCalman penned those regretful words as the author of a stylish, bestselling scholarly history that had been referred to as a ‘novel’. *The seven ordeals of Count Cagliostro* (2003) was no more a novel than *The secret river* was a history. But it was clear that the genres were eliding in exhilarating and dangerous ways. The ‘linguistic turn’ in cultural studies in the 1970s and 1980s, argued McCalman, cast doubt on the capacity of historians to find ‘the bedrock of reality outside the text’. Conservative empiricism launched the history wars into this crisis of expertise.

An earlier controversy had prepared the ground for media expectations of ‘warfare’ between opposing camps of ‘history’ and ‘fiction’. In 1995, Helen Demidenko’s novel, *The hand that signed the paper*, which won the Australian/Vogel Literary Award and the Miles Franklin Literary Award, raised serious and deeply felt concerns about its fictional treatment of the Ukrainian Famine and the Holocaust. The public debate was intense, for the novel was quickly seen as history. This perception was fuelled by the use that Demidenko made of her novel, in speeches and media interviews, as a platform for historical commentary. On these occasions, she drew upon the gravity and authenticity of her own Ukrainian ancestry and family stories. It was later revealed that Helen Demidenko was actually Helen Darville and her parents were British. The celebration of the literary stature of the book raised the issue of what responsibilities to historical truth are carried by an author of fiction who mobilises the power of such a dark, disturbing and recent past. Defenders of the book argued that it was illegitimate to subject a novel to historical criticism and that such critics were insensitive to fiction and its distinctive art. In response, Robert Manne in his book *The culture of forgetting*, analysed the way these accusations of ‘political correctness’ shaded into dismissals of ‘historical correctness’ and even cast doubt upon the accessibility of any reliable historical truth. Writing as someone for whom the Holocaust lay ‘at the very heart of [his] being’ and who had studied history in the hope of understanding it, Manne felt that the public celebration of the novel revealed a divorce in Australian culture between literary and human values (1996: 105-6). The Demidenko affair thus moulded the terrain for later debates. Media expectations of the opposition of history and fiction were firmly established, and trenches were already dug into the landscape, ready to be occupied when the new war broke out.

Inga Clendinnen had practised her critique of Grenville’s style of historical empathy for at least a quarter of a century. Writing in praise of English historian EP Thompson in *Historical Studies* in 1979, Clendinnen warned against the ‘attempt to simulate the

complexity of reality by projecting one's own common-sense interpretations to lend flesh to the skeletal record, in the eerie conviction that the people of the past are simply ourselves tricked out in fancy dress' (435-41). It was a metaphor that historian and anthropologist Greg Dening also often used: 'The most unhistorical thing we can do is to imagine that the past is us in funny clothes', he wrote (1998: 209). The unreflective flow of empathy can inhibit understanding. American historian and educationist Sam Wineburg, in his aptly-titled *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts*, found that historical thinking goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think. He warned against 'the seduction of coming to know people in the past by relying on the dimensions of our "lived experience"' (2001: vi-xiv). Like Clendinnen and Dening, Wineburg argued that the discipline of history is required to help us discover what we cannot instinctively feel or see.

Clendinnen was a member of a remarkable school of ethnographic history that included Dening, Donna Merwick and Rhys Isaac: American anthropologist Clifford Geertz called it 'the Melbourne Group' (1990: 321-35). Its distinctive approach centred on the determination to get inside episodes of past experience by attending especially to recorded action, by stripping back the overlay of interpretation to recover and reconstruct the raw theatre of past behaviour, and by using systematic intellectual procedures to work against the assumptions of empathy and intuition. Clendinnen's analysis of the spearing of Governor Phillip in *Dancing with strangers* is a classic example of this method of 'double vision'. As a member of that Group, Clendinnen had long thought about the intellectual discipline required to cross 'the gulf between sources and past reality' (1979: 435). To underestimate or deny that gulf, to be innocent about it, to be anything but humble in the face of what we have lost of the complex past, was to be vulnerable to error.

Clendinnen reflected that she was herself 'cured of residual faith in the utility of empathy' by her sustained study of Aztecs and their confronting culture of human sacrifice. She found that, if she were to penetrate any distance into the Aztec world of the imagination, she had to keep her own imagination 'on a very short leash' (2006: 22). In 1995, she was propelled by the Demidenko affair – and especially Robert Manne's *The culture of forgetting* – into a study of the literature of the Holocaust (1998b: 4-6). The resulting book, *Reading the Holocaust* (1998b), was an effort to overcome her bafflement about such horror: 'I felt guilt about my bafflement because I suspected its origins: that it arose because my reading of the Holocaust had been no more than dutiful; that I had refused full imaginative engagement' (3). What is the nature of that historical imagination? In this sustained meditation on the historical method, Clendinnen again distinguished the 'laborious and inherently contestable process' of historical analysis from 'the lightning flash of intuition' (21-4).

But Clendinnen is also fascinated by the art of fiction and the workings of memory. During serious illness, she had found herself turning to fiction. Trapped in a noisy shared hospital ward and metal bed with a rubber sheet, waiting for a liver transplant, she wrote to escape: 'Now for the first time I felt the desire to write fiction. I wanted

to feel I could change this inexorable place, these lonely shapeless deaths, even in imagination: fiction as defiance of exigency'. Clendinnen 'discovered that fiction can make its own claims to truth ... Fiction began to offer a balm for the obstinate opacities, the jagged inadequacies of memory' (2000: 77). After the transplant operation, she experienced hallucinations, which were 'like ancient flints' deep inside her that had worked their way to the light: 'I was beginning to suspect, after my drug-induced thrashings and wallowings, that we are fictions too' (189-91). She wrote more stories. Her memoir of this period of her life, *Tiger's eye* (2000), can be seen to share something with Grenville's memoir, *Searching for the secret river*, in that they both wrestle in a personal way with the relationship between history and fiction.

In 1999, Inga Clendinnen gave the ABC Boyer Lectures and turned finally to her own country's past, a subject she had avoided for over thirty years (thus following a similar trajectory as Robert Manne, whose reading also moved from the Holocaust to Aboriginal Australia at about the same time). The lectures, entitled *True stories*, were stimulated in part by John Howard's 'partisan opportunism' in the uses of history and his denunciation of 'black armband' historians. Clendinnen, by offering a close analysis of 'a cornucopia of true stories', argued that the study of history can encourage civic virtue and be morally and politically useful (1999). Her next book was to pursue that conviction in depth and detail. *Dancing with strangers* (2003) was a study of the first years of British settlement at Port Jackson and portrayed a 'springtime of trust' at the beginning of Australia's history of race relations. Eleanor Dark's Bennilong re-appears on the shoreline as a rather different Baneelon. As a professional historian, Clendinnen confessed that she knew the history of Australia 'as I know Chekhov's or Tolstoy's or Nobokov's Russia: from novels' (2000: 192). *The timeless land* was not one of those admired novels, but when Clendinnen called the Aborigines who encountered the British at Port Jackson 'the Australians', she made an imaginative leap not unlike Eleanor Dark's. When Clendinnen first heard of Grenville's novel about the early colony, she welcomed it as a 'sympathetic reconstruction' and said she 'would like to think it will extinguish the history wars, to a degree' (Sullivan 2005). As she wrote in *Tiger's eye*, 'Only fiction can redress the existential ambiguities which stalk the real world' (2000: 244). But she also observed: 'Fiction also affords the pleasure of the effortless penetration of fellow humans who are in the real world chronically enigmatic' (245).

In 2009, historian Grace Karskens revisited Sydney's foundation in her wonderful book, *The colony*, which analyses a whole generation of encounter and settlement. In Karskens' history, the British are the Berriwalgal, and Aboriginal people are shown to successfully make an enduring place for themselves in Sydney from its beginning. Karskens explained that she wanted 'to continue Clendinnen's and Grenville's project of re-examining and rethinking early colonial race relations' (2009: 13-14). Thus Karskens included the novelist in her historiography. The story of settlers pushing into new country up the isolated reaches of the Hawkesbury River had long fascinated local historians and novelists, as Karskens explained: '[Eleanor] Dark's protagonist Andrew Prentice recovers his humanity on the river; Grenville's William Thornhill

discovers the depths of his inhumanity' (121-2). But, for the historian, there is a unique story to be reconstructed.

Like Grenville and Clendinnen, Karskens aims to look unflinchingly at the violence of the past. But whereas Grenville's goal in *The secret river* is primarily to dramatise the violence – so that the reader may experience it – the burden of the historian is to try to explain it in broader social terms. 'How do we explain such brutality?' asks Karskens. 'Is it possible to explain it? Is there any logical explanation, any way of grasping it, making it part of the "known"? Or are sickening acts like this somehow beyond the pale, hanging repellent, unexplainable, in a separate dimension to history?' She feels compelled to *historicise* the murders of the frontier, 'not in order to justify or excuse them, but to understand how such a thing could have happened' (2009: 461-2). In doing so, atrocities might be recognised as more than acts of personal evil, but also as symptoms of social and cultural history.

So Karskens reveals that 'the "secret river" had in fact been long familiar'. The specificity and particularity of the Hawkesbury and of the war on the Cumberland Plain – time, place and chronology – matter very much in Karskens' search for understanding: 'one story will not do for all'. And as with Judith Wright's historical reconstruction of the Wadja, the silences become part of the narrative of *The colony*: 'When the details get sketchy, when I am spinning thin threads of interpretation between scanty sources, I will tell you' (2009: 13-14). As a historian, Karskens is dedicated to that quest to retrieve the unique particularity of past experience and to 'recreate as fully as possible the past's own present', to see it as a time, like our own, when choices existed and the future was not determined (2014). This is not just in order to understand the real complexity of the past, but also because such specificity gives us a purchase on the future. As Rhys Isaac put it,

History is the most particularizing of the social sciences; it must stand tall to remind the others of the power of contingency in human life ... [historians] have a responsibility ... to proclaim the deep truth that the world is what it is because of the particular sequences of what has been done. This is not just a ... scholars' debate; it is an affirmation of the possibilities of changing the disposition of things ... The shape of the world to come remains to be made by human action in circumstances that can never be foretold (2005).

Ross Gibson is another historian who has recently returned to that enigmatic period of cross-cultural conversation in eastern Australia in the late eighteenth century, in his book *26 views of the starburst world* (2012). In writing of Lieutenant William Dawes and his encounters with the Eora at Port Jackson, Gibson chose a literary form – non-fiction – 'that avoids the lures of fellow feeling' (17). He has also experimented with fiction as a stage for uncertainty and distance – as in his *The summer exercises* (2008) – but in *26 Views* he was searching for more space for speculation and inconclusiveness. 'So this book', he wrote, 'is meant to help you knock your analytical thinking against your intuitive rumination'. What he needs, as he seeks the form of his writing, 'is a means for accommodating doubt, for understanding that

mystery and the *inability to understand* are strong parts of what Dawes began to record in his notes' (2012: viii). Gibson honours two Dawes-inspired novels by Jane Rogers and Kate Grenville and the way they encourage the reader 'to empathise with distinctive characters', but for his purpose he needs 'a form that *works with* rather than *works away* the estrangement that the notebooks show not only between two cultures but also between the present and the past' (15-17). His deliberately fragmentary and dispersed non-fiction rebels against the individualism and conclusiveness of the classically styled novel and strives for access to environmental or communal mentalities 'that reach beyond the bounds of single, sovereign subjects' (17). Gibson's project also involves a search for a form of writing that is 'at odds with the assertive and individualistic urges of colonialism'. He thus has political as well as literary reasons for wanting to free himself from the deterministic tendencies of the realist historical novel, whose emergence was coincident with colonialism and was so influential on the writing of history in the nineteenth century (see, Morris-Suzuki 2005: 33-70). History and fiction are not easily teased apart, in life or art.

Barbara Kingsolver, novelist and essayist, wrote: 'I love fiction, strangely enough, for how true it is' (2002: 203). Eric Rolls, poet and historian, reflected that 'Much of the game of writing history is keeping it true' (1981: vii). Barry Lopez, writer of non-fiction and fiction, wrote:

Neither can truth be reduced to aphorism or formulas. It is something alive and unpronounceable. Story creates an atmosphere in which it becomes discernible as a pattern. For a storyteller to insist on relationships that do not exist is to lie. Lying is the opposite of story (1989: 61-71).

Novelist Alex Miller, trained in history, wrote that 'History and fiction may seem to be sibling rivals for the truth sometimes, but they are essentially complementary in their civilising project' (2006: 8-9). James Bradley also sees them as 'not opposed, but complementary, one a mapping of the real, of what was, the other a mapping of the subconscious, of the way we understand the real, and of the way we understand ourselves' (2006: 75-6).

Pat Barker, a novelist who has fictionalised real, historical individuals, was asked 'Which is better at getting at the truth? Fiction or history?' Her answer was: 'Oh, fiction every time' (2005). Like Grenville, she argued that fiction allowed her to 'slow down' the experience of horror so that she and her readers could think about it as it happened. This is rather similar to Clendinnen's technique in her analysis of the spearing of the Governor. Historian Tiffany Shellam, in her ethnographic history of King George's Sound, Western Australia, *Shaking hands on the fringe* (2009), also slows down the cultural encounters she describes so that we can perceive coincident action on the edge of vision. Kim Scott's award-winning novel, *That deadman dance* (2010), explores the same history of encounter in the same place and is inspired by years of extensive documentary research and family storytelling. Scott, who is one of

a community of Wirlomin Noongar people descended from coastal country to the east of Albany, appreciates Shellam as a fellow artist: ‘I think she sounds most of all like a novelist when she writes: “more time on imagining people’s motivations is a worthwhile activity; we see possibilities and choices rather than inevitabilities.”’ ‘Oh yes’, declares Scott, ‘that was my concern, researching a novel: not what was, but what might have been, and even what might yet be ...’ (2008: 103; see also, Shellam 2012). Mary Anne Jebb, who reviewed the novel and the history together for *Aboriginal History*, explained how they ‘emerge out of different writing traditions’ and both ‘slow down the frontier to imagine its smaller elements’. ‘They explore the edges of historical imagination in a way that will help to keep Australian history alive’ (2012: 237-9).

Here we listen to historians and novelists wrestling with truth. They are, as Miller, Bradley and Jebb insist, on a common campaign, and they each influence the other much more than either will professionally say. Often they will guide and inspire each other further into their distinct enquiries; sometimes their purposes will collide; sometimes a writer will change genres for political or artistic purpose. Both require what Inga Clendinnen called ‘full imaginative engagement’ – but of quite different kinds. Novelists are free to ‘pillage’ the past, but it is the historian’s civic and moral duty to insist on context.

Whereas Clendinnen sees a gulf between history and fiction, I see an intriguing dance around a shifting, essential line. The good historian, like the top tennis player, plays the edges and hits down that line. History’s commitment to evidence that can be revisited, to a journey of discovery that can be retraced and challenged, increases the writer’s artistic opportunities exponentially. Historians always have at least two stories to tell: what we think happened, and how we know what we think happened. So the ‘non’ in our ‘non-fiction’ signifies an edge that can sharpen our prose and heighten our sense of danger and wonder. It also acknowledges that there are things we don’t and can’t know. Silence, uncertainty and inconclusiveness become central to the narrative.

The art and science of history is in keeping it true – true not to some internal consistency of the created text, or true to a personal insight or feeling, or true to gathered facts, but rigorously, contextually, imaginatively and verifiably true to a reality beyond the text. The whole discipline of history and its community of scholarship strive to enable a kind of thinking that goes beyond and often against intuition, so that the strangeness of the past may, to some extent, be recovered.

The necessary and creative tension between history and fiction is not a turf war. The past is all we have. The present is but a breath, and the future doesn’t exist except as a projection of the past. The past – the full sum of human experience – is all we have on which to base our hopes and plans, and from which to draw our conversations, ideas and stories. Eleanor Dark, when asked ‘Do you draw your characters from life?’, responded in exasperation, ‘In Heaven’s name, what else is there to draw them from?’ (Dark nd(b)) History and fiction journey together and separately into that past; they

are sometimes uneasy partners, but they are also magnetically drawn to one another in the quest for deeper understanding.

Endnotes

1. I am grateful to the Mitchell Librarian for permission to quote from the Dark Papers held there, and to Varuna (The Writers House, Katoomba), Eleanor Dark's former home, for a Residential Fellowship that stimulated my interest in Dark's work. I am also grateful to Billy Griffiths, Libby Robin and two very helpful anonymous referees for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay.
2. The day I read this entry I went to town in morning & worked at Mitchell. Lunch in gardens, Mitchell in afternoon.
3. Judith's poem was one of the inspirations for Geoffrey Blomfield's detailed history of massacres in the region of the Hastings, Manning and Macleay Rivers, *Baal Belbora: The end of the dancing*. Blomfield, a local grazier, described his bias as 'offensively Aboriginal' and suffered discrimination in his community as a consequence of his research and writing. He describes some of the campaign against him in his 1990 *A dog's hind leg*. (kindly drawn to my attention by Barbara Holloway). Judith Wright commented that 'Geoff's book has aroused the bitterest feelings in the New England district, even now – removing the Cover-up is like taking the scab off an unhealed wound.' Grace Bartram (1981) wrote a novel inspired by the story of Darkie Point (or Head), entitled *Darker grows my valley*.
4. Wright's reference is to the Melbourne academic historian, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, and her book *Sir John Franklin in Tasmania, 1837-1843*.
5. This period remains unscrutinised in *The generations of men* (1959: 42).
6. Grenville earlier presented this argument as part of her Inaugural Thea Astley Lecture at the Byron Bay Writers' Festival on 5 August 2005, published as 'Saying the unsayable' (2006: 176-81). For more on Astley's historical fiction and for thoughtful reflections on the Grenville debate, see Susan Sheridan (2011).
7. However, Cosic did add that: 'To a third party, six years later, the piece [McKenna's essay] seems a tough but not wildly inflammatory contribution to the public discourse.'
8. See, for example, Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton, who declared 'This history war was a turf war' (2007: 21-3). Ashton and Hamilton, both historians and academic teachers of public history, concluded: 'It is not, however, surprising that some people had drifted away from the work of those history scholars who showed disdain for wide audience appeal and "powerful popular writing" while issuing permits for permissible pasts' (23). Curiously, this criticism appeared to be directed at Clendinnen and McKenna, in spite of the fact that their books have been notable for their wide audience appeal.
9. I've not quoted this private correspondence, which Grenville refers to on her website. It followed the publication of my essay, 'History and the creative imagination' in 2009, which discussed Grenville's memoir, *Searching for the secret river*.
10. The last phrase is from Grenville's *Searching for the secret river* (2008: 217). Sue Kossew, in her introduction to *Lighting dark places: Essays on Kate Grenville*, describes empathy as 'a keystone of [Grenville's] oeuvre: her approach seems always driven by a desire to understand what she herself may have done or thought, had she been one of her chosen characters' (2011: xi).
11. I am grateful to Delia Falconer for offering me another novelist's view of the relations between fiction and history during a conversation at Varuna in May 2007.

12. An excellent long perspective on disciplinary debates about history and fiction is provided by Ann Curthoys and John Docker in *Is history fiction?* (2006).

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