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Fictional histories and historical fictions

Everywhere public enthusiasm for history has grown. This trend goes well beyond the archival turn in fiction writing that may or may not be a counterpart to the narrative turn in history. Not only are historical novels and nonfiction histories in much demand, but so too are increasingly spectacular television documentaries, lavish costume dramas, computer games featuring narratives of imperial conquest – or, indeed, the murky doings of tomb raiding archaeologists – as well as a burgeoning variety of hybrid forms of fiction and nonfiction for which new catchwords are constantly being thrown up, such as *fictional* documentaries (as opposed to *factual* ones), docudramas, docusoaps, biopics, and, of course, reality television featuring historical themes. Crowds are flocking to commemorative ceremonies in larger numbers. Historical reenactment has become a significant popular pastime.¹ Major media outlets regularly cover historical debates as ‘news items’, reshaping stories to fit the criteria of ‘news values’, which are often driven less by journalistic standards and more by the profit-making requirements of commercial media organisations. And all of this transpires in the context of a qualitatively new, heavily mediated, and technologically enhanced public culture in which meaning and value are driven by very different energies.² In the midst of all of this, there has been a pronounced shift in the social and cultural functions that history serves. History and memory appear to have become central to wider debates over democracy and justice – indeed, history has become the actual ground on which such issues are regularly contested.

This special issue of *TEXT* is devoted to exploring different forms of history writing in an era in which history has assumed renewed political and cultural importance. It examines the diverse ways that writers of all types, including novelists, poets and historians, engage with the task of history writing, paying careful attention to not only the works of esteemed historians and novelists, but also the works of novelists who write history, historians who write novels, and experimental writers who veer between the different realms. The volume is itself the product of a collaborative dialogue. It has been co-edited by a writer and a historian, contains essays from both writers and historians, which have been refereed by both writers and historians, as well as interested scholars in cultural studies and literature. The impact of this collaboration has been felt on many levels. Contributors have often rethought, contextualised, or otherwise modified their positions. Even the permanent editors of the journal have set

aside some of their conventions and preferences, allowing the issue to go to print with more endnotes than is usual to accommodate historians.

In the Australian context – and, indeed, internationally – it has long been difficult to think about the relationship between history and writing outside the prism of the so-called History Wars, which were partly a by-product of the Culture Wars of the late 1980s and 1990s as they took shape in the United States. These were fought between liberal and conservative intellectuals over diverse cultural issues ranging from the politics of parenting to the composition of school curricula in history and literature.³ A notable example in the United States involved the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum's attempt to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima,⁴ a more recent example in the United Kingdom involved the Secretary of Education's failed attempt to introduce 'tub-thumping English nationalism' into the school curriculum (Evans 2013a and 2013b). In Australia, the History Wars quickly ceased to be a by-way in a wider Culture War and soon became the main event.⁵ They took on particular ferocity in the wake of the epoch-making Mabo and Wik decisions of the High Court, which returned native title to Aboriginal people, as well as the Australian Human Rights Commission's report on the 'Stolen Generations', which, among other things, recommended that the government formally apologise to Aboriginal people for policies involving the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families pursued both historically and as late as 1970. The History Wars, as they played out emotively in the public sphere, were not merely a struggle over the representation of 'history' or even 'historic wrongs' so much as they signaled deepening social divisions on questions such as culpability, reparation, national identity and social justice. The History Wars cut straight to the heart of unasked – or, at least, hitherto unanswered – questions about the kind of society in which people wanted to live. The constant summoning of history has profound political consequences, as people – or, more specifically, politicians – look less to the future and more to the past as a means of controlling the present. The current government is no different: Prime Minister Tony Abbott's comment in August 2014 that British colonisation was 'the defining moment in Australian history' appears to preempt the October 2014 findings of the National Curriculum Review.⁶ Hayden White, in his still controversial essays on history and literature, has caught something of these dilemmas, writing 'In choosing our past, we choose a present; and vice versa. We use the one to *justify* the other' (2010: 135, original emphasis).

One of the unexpected byways in the Australian History Wars was a protracted standoff between historians and writers. This well-rehearsed series of occasionally acrimonious engagements included an essay in which Inga Clendinnen accused writers of historical fiction – and novelist Kate Grenville, in particular – of attempting to 'bump historians off the track' (2006: 16). In another much-quoted essay, Mark McKenna also took aim at Grenville, extending the argument to include novelists such as Roger McDonald and David Malouf (McKenna 2005, 2006). Peter Carey was besieged by Ned Kelly enthusiasts at the Brisbane Writers Festival, and once again following a speech delivered at the Canberra Press Club, during which members of

the audience expressed fears that Carey's Kelly would replace the 'historical' Kelly in the popular imagination (Clendinnen 2006: 32, McCalman 2004: 153). Meanwhile, John Hirst took issue with a whole range of novels in all styles, periods and genres, saving particular derision for Grenville's more recent work for promulgating a 'liberal fantasy' about the colonial encounter (Hirst 2005: Location 1385 and *passim*). Bain Attwood similarly claimed to have a corner on 'the truth' about Australia's frontier history, deprecating the emotive and un-historical versions of this history allegedly being peddled not only by writers and artists, but also – somewhat surprisingly – by museum curators, heritage planners and certain Aboriginal historians (2005a, 2005b, see also 2001).

If writers have been guilty of courting public sympathy for wounds received or inflicted in the course of the Australian History Wars, then so too have historians taken pains to present themselves as an embattled if not thoroughly endangered species. Unlike other academics – in, say, semiotics or linguistics, for example – a number of Australian historians have enjoyed broad public audiences owing to the literary power of their work. Historians such as Henry Reynolds and Manning Clark have long been considered household names, if not always for their writing then for the sheer force of their political views. Historians including Tom Griffiths, Clare Wright and Mark McKenna have regularly carried off the country's most prestigious literary awards – including not only history awards, but also those that are, as often as not, judged by novelists and poets. Nevertheless, the sense of history being a discipline under siege has seen the Australian Historical Association perennially discuss the issue of introducing a licensing system for historians. As Ian McCalman has argued, 'Part of what is at stake in the History Wars is how we are able to assert and defend our territory as expert professionals' (cited in Attwood 2005a: 5).

In the twilight of this debate, this issue of *TEXT* considers the possibility that the positions of at least some of the so-called combatants were not as stark or antipathetic as they initially appeared. Mark McKenna, for example, who is so often cited as a major adversary in what might be called the 'Literary Wars', has also written that 'To mark out the unique advantages of history is not to deny the historical insights of fiction'. He has also reflected on the ways in which he has been accustomed to use fiction in his history writing, including 'quotations from fiction and poetry, often as epigraphs, because they expressed, more succinctly and more powerfully, historical insights similar to my own, sometimes they even helped point the way' (2006: 108). So too Tom Griffiths, in his well-known essay on history and creative imagination, as well as in an essay written for this collection, makes a similar point, speculating, for example, on the seminal influence of the novels of Eleanor Dark on the writing of Australian history, in particular the 'stunning imaginative leap from the ships to the shore', by which Dark envisaged the arrival of the Europeans, on a 'ship with wings', from the perspective of the continent's original inhabitants (2009: 74.4).

This volume includes essays that reflect back on the debates around history, literature, imagination, and writing practice that were engendered by the History Wars, but also seeks to move beyond these acrimonious dichotomies – and, indeed, annexing of

professional territories – to examine the practice of writers and historians whose work evades easy categorisation, exploring diverse themes from speculative biography to children’s literature. The collection opens with a work of experimental writing by Stephen Muecke, aptly entitled ‘A diplomat for the History Wars’, for which the author, with wicked verisimilitude, has created the figure of a diplomat to parley arguments, including the things that the warring parties may need to relinquish in order to achieve peace. Muecke’s conversational poetry is infused with a certain kind of lyricism – the poetic form held in delightful tension with the content; which may well be described as an act of diplomacy in itself.⁷ The opening essay, ‘The intriguing dance of history and fiction’, also embarks on what might be called a mission of diplomacy, in which historian Tom Griffiths explores the common ground between writers and historians, including novelists who write history and historians who write novels, but suggests that there may well be things that neither side can forego. He therefore envisages the relationship between history and fiction as ‘a tag team, sometimes taking turns, sometimes working in tandem, to deepen our understanding and extend our imagination’.

In ‘Archival poetics: Writing history from the fragments’, Camilla Nelson turns away from the History Wars to examine a specific kind of writing which has emerged from the archive. Interrogating a range of works in history and fiction that centre upon the archive as a site of truth and deceit, violence and poetry, she argues that these works suggest that history may be less about the ‘sublime chaos of the past’ than ‘how we engage with the past, which is, on reflection, an entirely different thing’. This issue of engagement is also a theme in Clare Wright’s essay, ‘Making *The war that changed us*: From the frontline of history, television and military remembrance’. In this essay, Wright examines the ‘curse and liberation’ of writing for television, carefully delineating the tensions and compromises inherent in the process of ‘corporate creativity’ – that is, working collaboratively and creatively with teams of producers, directors, editors and industry in order to make documentaries for a mass audience. Wright’s essay affirms the need for scholars to intervene in the processes of making of public history, to stake out a place in the ‘already overcrowded marketplace of ideas’. The topic of engagement continues in Hsu-Ming Teo’s essay, ‘History, the Holocaust and children’s historical fiction’, which considers the recent award of the NSW Premier’s History Prize to a work of young adult fiction. Novel histories for adults may continue to cause outrage among certain historians, but it appears that history as fiction remains acceptable to most historians when children are the intended audience. If Teo concerns herself with what children actually learn from reading novels, then Andrew Cowan, in his essay ‘Writing *Worthless men*: History and the literary’, aptly asks himself what he, too, may – and, indeed, may not – have learnt from the challenging task of writing one. Cowan’s novel, set on the home front during World War One, was based on numerous oral history recordings that the author had made in his mid-twenties. ‘If I was contributing to the historical turn in contemporary literature, I was doing so more or less unknowingly’, writes Cowan. ‘I might even have denied I was writing a historical novel.’

Also dwelling on the idea of history and the ‘literary’, historian Ann Curthoys extends the scope of this collection by investigating the concept of history as literature through a critical analysis of EP Thompson’s *The making of the English working class*, a modern tour de force of history writing that most readers would place alongside Edward Gibbon’s *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire* as among the most important works of English literature. How, Curthoys asks, does Thompson manage to observe all the protocols of scholarly history, and yet come up with such absorbing and affective writing? Part of the answer may yet lie in the *history* of history, a theme that Curthoys, together with John Docker, has powerfully explored elsewhere (2005). Docker and Curthoys have mounted a powerful argument that history, from its inception in the age of Herodotus, has been a doubled or intertwined project. History is not only a ‘sustained enquiry’ into the past, but also ‘history as literary, engaged in narrative, history as drama, engaged in the creation of scenes, characters, and speeches’ (13). This intertwined project continued largely unabated until the nineteenth century when historians began to define their discipline as a science, and an estrangement between history and literature ensued.

The complex terrain of history’s relationship to literature is further explored in Christopher Kremmer’s essay ‘From dialectics to dialogue: Bakhtin, White and the “moorings” of fiction and history’. In reflecting on the writing of his recent novel, *The chase*, Kremmer is explicit in the claims he makes for the historical status of neo-historical fiction. He argues that ‘when the fictional narrative is constitutively indebted to historical referents, and intended to recreate the particularities of a specific historical period and its people, then to say “I made it up” seems at best irresponsible, and at worst disingenuous’. Drawing on the work of theorists Mikhail Bakhtin and Hayden White, Kremmer envisages the new and exciting conversations that might yet take place between history and fiction, if and when the two pursuits are understood not as competing but rather as complementary projects. ‘History is not imaginary’, writes Kremmer, ‘but it is imagined.’

Anna Haebich also explores the permeable boundaries between fiction and history. Her essay, ‘Somewhere between fiction and non-fiction: New approaches to writing crime histories’, is written from the point of view of a historian who has recently crossed the border from history into fiction. In reflecting on the experience of writing her novel, *Murdering stepmothers*, Haebich argues that the artifice of archival sources actively encourages writing that is imaginative, subjective and ambiguous. Indeed, the fictive nature of the sources may actively require the use of fictive writing as a means to express their many-layered complexities. The permeable boundaries between history and fiction are further explored in Donna Lee Brien’s essay on speculative biography, “‘The facts formed a line of buoys in the sea of my own imagination’”. In defiance of the codes of objective writing, authorial imagination is central to the processes of speculative biography. Brien tackles the antithetical tendencies in this kind of writing and argues that much may be gained from using empathetic strategies to produce biographies that are powerful narratives of lived experience.

In the provocatively entitled final essay of this collection, ‘Fictorians: Historians who “lie” about the past, and like it’, historian Christine de Matos further investigates the subgenre of history writing emerging from a growing group of professional historians who, for a variety of reasons and often with different aims, have crossed the perhaps imagined boundaries between writing history and writing novels. These historians, whom de Matos calls the ‘fictorians’, write fictionalised histories to complement, or sometimes replace, their non-fiction work. Through such topics as imagination, emotion, subjectivity, mythology and history writing, the article briefly considers what this ‘fictional turn’ might mean for the future of scholarly history.

As de Matos’ essay makes clear, debates about history and fiction invariably pitch novelist against historian, and are regularly played out in terms of a rhetoric of battles fought, wars waged, and territories annexed or defended. And yet, left to their own devices, historians not infrequently debate the question of whether history should return to considering itself as a literature – rather than, in the words of historian Inga Clendinnen, ‘in its own idiosyncratic way a science’ (2003). Yet it is not always entirely clear what the reconceptualisation of history as a literature might entail – beyond the perhaps idle dream that every academic historian should suddenly become a sparkling prose artist. One obvious point would be that the discourse of ‘mastery’ – often expressed as archival ‘mastery’ (Sentilles 2006: 142) – which so often underwrites the historian’s claim of expertise, would need to be replaced by an ethics of engagement, including, perhaps, a little less ‘policing’ of the work of novelists. There would need to be greater recognition of the need for a disruptive plurality of voices. Instead of a ‘kneejerk’ distrust of polished prose, there might also be a wider recognition that good prose doesn’t necessarily mean reduced rigor (Sachs 2010). More controversially, as Hayden White (2005) has argued, more historians might need to understand their discipline to be engaged in the production of ‘meaning’ – this is, after all, the ineffable terrain with which literature traditionally concerns itself – rather than ‘knowledge’ in the strictly scientific sense. However, what few critics have perhaps adequately registered is that if history is to become a literature – concerned with the explication of ‘the great existential questions posed by time, aging, absence, loss, violence and death’ (White 2005: 338) – then it may be that the field of literature, and its relationship to art and writing practice, will also need to be rethought. Writers, too, may have to adjust.

Endnotes

1. There is a burgeoning literature on popular history, public history and memory studies. Recent works include Iain McCalman and Paul Pickering’s (2010) collection of essays on the popularity of historical re-reenactment, including chapters on reality television, Jerome de Groot’s (2009) *Consuming history: Historians and heritage in contemporary popular culture* and Paul Ashton and Hilda Kean’s (2009) *People and their pasts: Public history today*. An earlier collection *History and the media*, edited by David Cannadine (2004), includes essays by prominent public historians such as Simon Schama, Melvyn Bragg, Jeremy Issacs and David Puttnam. There are also several interesting chapters on history as reality television in Julia Tadeo and Ken Dvorak’s (2010) *The tube has spoken: Reality TV and history*. Significant American studies include Oliver Horton and Lois E Horton’s (2013) *Slavery and*

public history: The tough stuff of American memory, and the earlier classic edited by Michael Hogan (1996) *Hiroshima in history and memory*. For recent Australian studies, see Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton's (2010) *History at the crossroads: Australians and the past* and Paul Ashton, Paula Hamilton and Rose Searby's (2012) *Places of the Heart: Memorials in Australia*. Jerome de Groot's (2009) survey of the historical novel from the eighteenth century to the present is also of interest here, as are works by Robert A Rosenstone (2014) and many others on historical films.

2. Research on news values has been a growing field since Galtung and Ruge produced their classic study in 1965. Recent works include Cotter's (2010) *News talk: Investigating the language of journalism*, and Bednarek and Caple's (2012) *News discourse*. Henry Jenkins is one of the most celebrated theorists writing about media convergence and the transformation of public culture today. His most recent work is *Spreadable Media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture* (Jenkins, Ford & Green 2013).
3. There is a vast literature on the American Culture Wars, including some more recent collections that survey their origins and major themes. For recent compendiums, see Chapman's (2010) *Culture wars* and Sharp and Huynh's (2009) *The culture wars: Australian and American politics in the 21st century*. Earlier works on Australia include David McKnight's (2005) *Beyond Right and Left: New politics and the culture wars*.
4. The curators of the exhibition planned a complex experience that would present multiple perspectives, from US veterans to the Japanese victims of the bomb. After the plans were made public in 1994, a contest of interpretation emerged between curators and historians, veterans and their organisations, and conservative politicians. The result was, as Michael J Hogan (1996: 229) has described, the triumph of 'the commemorative voice ... over the historical voice' with the withdrawal of the plans. Instead, a much simpler exhibition was installed with the *Enola Gay*, the plane responsible for dropping of that first atomic weapon, as the highlight and with little explanatory context. Similar debates over that same war are of course also evident in Japan, most notably in the conservative-driven official history textbook issue (see, for instance, Bukh 2007). In January 2015, conservative Prime Minister Abe Shinzo extended the contest back across the Pacific to the United States, accusing the latter of misrepresenting Japan and the Asia Pacific War in its own school textbooks (Fackler 2015).
5. On the Australian History Wars specifically, see Stuart McIntyre and Anna Clark (2003) *The history wars*, Robert Manne's (2003) *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's fabrication of Aboriginal history*, Anna Clark's (2008) *History's children: History wars in the classroom*, and Marilyn Lake, Henry Reynolds, Mark McKenna and Joy Damousi's (2010) *What's wrong with Anzac? The militarisation of Australian history*. A defense of Windschuttle's work can be found in James Dawson's (2010) *Washout: On the academic response to the fabrication of Aboriginal history*.
6. Prime Minister Tony Abbott's comments preempted the October 2014 findings of the National Curriculum Review, appointed by education minister Christopher Pyne, which subsequently found that the current history curriculum lacked an emphasis on 'Judeo-Christian heritage' and 'the role of Western civilisation'. For recent critiques of the curriculum see Misty Adoniou, Bill Loudon, David Zyngier and Stewart Riddle's (2014) response published in *The Conversation*, while the controversy among indigenous groups has been reported by Sarah Dingle (2014) in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and elsewhere. Also of interest here is the controversy surrounding Tony Abbott's award of Australia Day honours to Prince Philip, prince consort to Queen Elizabeth II of Britain. See, for example, Levy (2015) and Massola (2015).
7. We are indebted to the journal's anonymous referee for this thought.

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