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Making The war that changed us: Notes from the frontline of history, television and military remembrance

Abstract

The war that changed us, produced by Electric Pictures, directed by Don Featherstone, and co-written by Don Featherstone and Clare Wright, aired on ABC1 in July 2014. This essay reflects on the role of the professional historian in the process of developing and writing a four-part television documentary series to commemorate the centenary of World War I. It explores the conflicts and collaborations required to bring to the small screen an enormous story with huge implications for current political debates about remembrance, patriotism and the function of the national broadcaster.

Biographical note:

Clare Wright is an award-winning historian, author and broadcaster who has worked in politics, academia and the media. She is the author of *Beyond the ladies lounge: Australia's female publicans* (MUP 2003, Text 2014) and *The forgotten rebels of Eureka* (Text 2013). The latter won the 2014 Stella Prize and the NIB Literary Prize, was short-listed for the Prime Minister's, Queensland, NSW and WA Literary Awards, and was long-listed for a Walkley. Clare researched, wrote and presented the acclaimed ABC1 documentary *Utopia girls* and devised and co-wrote the ABC documentary series, *The war that changed us*. Clare is currently an ARC Future Fellow at La Trobe University, researching a new history of mining in Australia.

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Television history's curse and its liberation is what veteran journalist and producer Chris Masters has called 'the compromise of collaboration'. 'A feature of television that has long appealed', both to Masters and myself, is what Masters labels 'corporate creativity' (Masters 2013). One of the concessions to cross-industry co-operation is, perhaps, the inherent complexity in writing analytically about the whole endeavour. Working closely, creatively and collaboratively with a team of producers, directors, researchers, commissioning editors and financial backers engenders a sense of obligation not to let the side down, even when not all of the compromises have gone your way. There is simply too much invested, by too many, with the stakes balanced incredibly high. It is hard to be a team player and critically detached at the same time. This essay is intended to provide an informed yet personal account of the process of making history in the mass media for a mass audience in an era when, as historian Jerome de Groot has argued, 'history has become commodified (or works within a nexus of commodification) irrespective of the actions of historians' (de Groot 2009).

If it is tricky to navigate corporate codes of behaviour (not to mention legal obligations of commercial in confidence), it is also difficult for historians to talk about making historical television documentaries in a way that does not leave them wide open to criticism from their own profession; a profession which values intellectual independence above company identity and critical thinking above the machinery and logic of the market. It would be safer to simply have fun making telly programs and write journal articles that bear all the hallmarks of scholarly rigour, quarantining the two arms of one's practice as a professional historian. But it is worth trying to lay bare the actual nuts and bolts of how a history documentary comes to be made, if for no other reason than, as de Groot argues, 'understanding the processes of communication and consumption that are undergone in contemporary popular engagement with the past [which] will afford us a more nuanced perception of this process' (de Groot 2009).¹ Some historians have queried the value of the so-called 'democratisation' of the discipline of history, believing that 'shared authority' is problematic (Ashton and Hamilton 2010: 94). On the other hand, media historian Peter J. Beck points to 'the need for fellow academics to appreciate the multiplicity of television histories as well as to approach the subject with greater sophistication'. Beck quotes experienced British television history presenter Tristan Hunt on the issue of legitimacy: 'The question is no longer one of validity but of progress; not whether television history is a good thing, but how do we make it better' (Beck 2012: 93). With the objective of encouraging better history documentaries made by more fellow academics, this essay recounts this historian's experience of creating an academically sound, and commercially viable, television program in Australia today. It describes my involvement in the making of the multi-million dollar publicly-funded project *The war that changed us* and establishes why being involved was so important to me as an historian. Given the array of investors (including Screen Australia, the ABC, the Department of Veterans Affairs, ScreenWest and the private production company Electric Pictures), it identifies the nature of those 'compromises of collaboration' and

finally grapples with the question: is ‘shared authority’ really an insurmountable problem?

I first began discussions with the ABC about the idea of a documentary to commemorate the centenary of World War I in mid-2012, soon after my film *Utopia girls: How women won the vote* went to air. I was having a debrief meeting in a Melbourne café with the then commissioning editor of history programming. Unexpectedly, he asked me to pitch him an idea for a war documentary. He said that with the anniversary of WWI and Gallipoli fast approaching, the ABC was going to have to make something and, to quote him, ‘if we have to make the same old shit, we’ll make the same old shit’. What he meant was that he didn’t *want* to make a clichéd documentary about brave diggers losing their youthful innocence and, through their sacrifice, forging a new nation. He didn’t want to make the latest rehash of Anzac jingoism, but in the absence of an alternative, he implied that’s just what the ABC would do. It would rate well (enough) and tick programming boxes. Job done.

On the spot I decided I would give him an alternative. I told him I was interested in writing (and presenting) a commemoration narrative that honoured the strong sentimental attachment many Australians had to the Gallipoli legend, but one which allowed for greater inclusiveness in the voices that tell our national story. I wanted to restore some historical authenticity to the Anzac narrative, without undermining the central cohesive function or personal affective dimensions of war remembrance. In a follow up email to him I later wrote: ‘As a professional historian, my fear is that any doco that doesn’t attempt to address the idea of “the legacy of war” will look hopelessly out of step with the thrust and content of recent scholarship.’ Then I got a bit ‘lecturey’: ‘The gulf between intellectual practice and popular culture doesn’t need to be yawning, because, as we both know, history isn’t a bore!’ And finally I laid all my political cards on the table:

It is my personal view that Anzac represents a death, not a birth, in the rites of passage of Australian nationhood in that WWI killed off the progressive utopianism for which Australia was gaining international recognition and acclaim. And that further, Anzac can be viewed as a sort of blood sacrifice for the destruction of black Australia, which having been publically performed, and ritually replayed, meant that the violence that lay at the heart of white colonialism – the psychic enemy within – could be forever silenced (Wright 2011).

I did not expect the sort of story I would like to tell about Australia’s experience of WWI – one that included women’s perspectives and dealt explicitly with the trauma, grief and social divisiveness of war – would ever make it to our screens. I was painfully aware, as my provisos about emotional sensitivity were designed to show, that, as historian Michelle Arrow has pointed out, ‘the contemporary allure of war in the popular historical consciousness [is] partly the product of a conservative political environment’ (Arrow: 2013). I assumed that my concept would frighten the horses at the ABC. But I was determined that ‘the same old shit’ would not be made for lack of a viable option.

Of course, viability would not hinge on the availability or otherwise of recent and relevant scholarship about Australia's wartime identity and experience that challenged the simplicity and primacy of the Anzac legend. There was not only abundant and vibrant new research from thesis-to-book scholars like Bart Ziino, Marina Larsson and Janet Butler, but also the increasingly public critique of 'Anzackery' – the simplification and militarisation of Australian history – coming from the likes of Marilyn Lake, Henry Reynolds, Peter Stanley and some veterans themselves.² By 2012, historians had amply demonstrated that, as Marilyn Lake framed the debate, 'it was inappropriate ... for a modern democratic nation to adopt an Imperial, masculinist, militarist event as the focus of our national self-definition in the twenty-first century' (Lake 2010: 3). In the place of nationalist myth-making, historians had produced evidence of individual, intergenerational and social damage and division; 'the devastating impact of war on the human mind and body', as Larsson's work graphically illustrates (Larson 2009: 17). Viability *in television terms* would mean how such scholarship could be translated into screen history that conformed to the golden rules of successful program making: a hero's journey, an emotional journey and an epic journey.

Quite remarkably, the story I breathlessly pitched over that cup of coffee in the few minutes the TV executive had before he jumped into a taxi to the airport became the conceptual and narrative basis of *The war that changed us*. What I proposed was the counter-intuitive angle of looking at the whole war, 1914-1918, through the eyes of a woman, thus subverting the hackneyed view of war history as being about the manly things that men did in the company of other men, who they mostly killed unless they were mates and then they stuck by them. The woman would be AIF nurse Kit McNaughton, whose story I was familiar with because of the as yet unpublished doctoral research of my colleague at La Trobe University, Janet Butler. Butler's work illustrated the psychically and socially transformative nature of the overseas wartime experience for McNaughton, who treated soldiers at Lemnos Island and on the Western Front. The hero's journey would be a woman's journey, one that could be reliably tethered to Kit's extant wartime diaries. This would be evidence-based history. And it would be an emotional journey, not only because Kit's own psychological and physical journey was so harrowing, but because her relationships with AIF soldiers were a way into the loss and grief and devastation of the war. Her correspondence with family in Little River, Victoria, also gave us a tangible link to the homefront, once again grinding down the hard edges of an overly masculinised combat narrative.

The ABC executive liked it. It was fresh and unexpected. Seeing the war from a woman's point of view would automatically cut across so much of what was hackneyed about existing military history on television. But could it be epic enough, he wondered? Monumental enough? Anything the ABC did would have to be a BIG story. Landmark. How could you telescope Kit's personal/internal journey out into a 'five star grand narrative about Gallipoli' (ABC 2011)? He was not convinced that one woman's shoulders could ever be wide enough to hang a nation's history on. (At this point I had uncomfortable flashbacks to the moment I was told, in being passed

over for the job of presenting a major television history series some years earlier, that ‘the ABC is concerned that Australian audiences aren’t ready for a female authority figure to tell them their history’.)³ Whether gender bias or genuine concerns for narrative integrity were at play is unclear.

But the television executive was sufficiently intrigued (he had batted away plenty of my story ideas before, driving them deep into the intellectual outer) for me to go to the next step and discuss my idea with an executive at Screen Australia, the organisation that would ultimately be the principal investor in any successful bid. I knew enough about the industry to understand that unless the funders were keen, there was no point in badgering the networks. The Screen Australia representative liked it, as a filmmaker and as a femocrat, and a few months later, when she left the national agency and started work as an executive producer for a Fremantle-based production company, she approached me to develop a proposal to put to her bosses at Electric Pictures. If they liked the concept, they could then pitch it to the ABC.⁴

It is instructive how different in tone a TV pitch is from, say, an ARC application. Like a grant application, the proposal must include a tight descriptive element that outlines, in plain language, the aims, significance and expected outcomes of the project, and demonstrates the innovative nature of the approach. But unlike conventional academic history-writing, the tone is not neutral, measured and precise. This is part of my pitch to Electric Pictures for the series I then titled ‘The tug of war’:

‘The tug of war’ is history on a grand scale, wrought from fine grain detail. A sweeping family saga that takes us across three continents and four brutal years that would change the course of human history, and test the mettle of the world’s newest nation – Australia.

This is a story where the political is personal, and the epic is located in the everyday.

This is the story of an Australian woman – army nurse Kit McNaughton – who answered the call to serve her nation at war. It is told in the present tense through Kit’s own diaries, started on the day she boarded the troop ship at Station Pier, and completed on the fourth anniversary of that symbolic departure. Bold, cheeky, eagle-eyed, Kit becomes our Ulysses, our Dorothy, on a heroic journey from Little River through to Lemnos, then France, and back to Oz. We meet the men and women whose fates collide with her own: lovers, friends, patients. We hear these Australians’ intersecting stories through their own letters and diaries.

The story is not a dry academic treatise about ‘women’s role in the war’ but a richly evocative discovery of Australians at war, and in particular, the great wrenching dislocations of international conflict: the opposing pull of empire and nation, of soldiers and pacifists, of frightened men and brave women, of hierarchies old and new – Britons and Australians, fathers and sons, brothers and sisters, autonomy and obligation. There will not be a dry eye in the house.

Being driven by human emotions, motivations, decisions and destinies – not dreary military machinations – our storytelling allows us to get closer to the actual experience

of war: how being on the battle front changed the lives of the combatants and caregivers who were there, and how they communicated their changing identities to the home front they had left behind, and to which the lucky ones would inevitably return. Ultimately, we will discover how the war changed the nation they called home.

From the diaries and letters of a coterie of ordinary Australians brought together in the biggest, most extraordinary event of their lives, ‘The tug of war’ telescopes out to discover the push-me pull-me struggles of a nation at war: the conflict between imperialism and independence, militarism and pacifism, Old World enmities and New World Utopianism, and all the racialised, sectarian and gendered layers of the blistering sociopolitical onion.

‘The tug of war’ uses a radically innovative strategy for storytelling: employing a woman’s voice (and mitigated through a female presenter) to lead us through the uncertainties, the conflicts and the crises – personal, national and international – of a world at war.

‘The tug of war’ pays respectful homage to the real voices of war, including those who have been previously silenced in conventional accounts of armed combat.

This is history-making at its edgy, authentic best (Wright 2012).

Deliberately distancing myself from an approach that might seem in any way ‘academic’ or ‘textbook’, I then went on to outline a detailed narrative arc that delineated Kit’s movements over four episodes, other minor characters (including AIF soldiers Archie Barwick and Harold Burke), excerpts from Kit and Archie’s diaries, potential interviewees (including Janet Butler, on whose good will and research I was at this stage completely reliant), and a detailed outline of key events on both the homefront and warfront over the span of 1914-1919. The tenor of the pitch might have been breezy and shot-through with marketing hooks, but the research base was also clearly evident.

The upshot was a four-way conference call with Electric’s CEO Andrew Ogilvie, development manager Greg Colgan, and executive producer Claire Jager. They liked the ideas, but again doubted that one woman could be our hero. Instead – and here was the first compromise in the hope of an eventual collaboration – we agreed to foreground another main character or, possibly, characters. I suggested elevating Tasmanian soldier Archie Barwick to a lead role, as well as radical unionist Tom Barker, who was a vocal anti-war campaigner in Sydney, and Aboriginal soldier Daniel Hodgekiss from South Australia. Greg Colgan suggested we add war correspondent Keith Murdoch to the mix.

Around this time, mid-April 2012, the ABC put out a national call-out for submissions for history programming to commemorate the centenary of WWI. The key criteria for these ‘landmark’ documentaries were that they:

- be wide in appeal;
- have a strong fresh hook;

- be innovative in approach;
- be distinguishable from other programming;
- address the big picture;
- set Australia's story in the international context; and
- return audiences week on week (Wright 2012).

The question of audience was key. Television is a medium that is uniquely calibrated to meet the demands, desires and expectations of its audience.⁶ This might not be so true of news-based and investigative journalism television, which draws its rationale from the reporting of the truth. History documentary television programming, while coming under the commissioning rubric of Factual, sits more on the spectrum of light entertainment than news. This is even the case at the ABC which, though it does not draw its revenue from advertising, is still, in my experience, hair-trigger sensitive to who is or is not watching its programs and why. Where history programming is concerned, it is taken as gospel that the traditional audience for history comprises an older and predominantly male demographic. In terms of the commercialisation and consumption of content, this is unquestionably a bad thing. Television broadcasters want their audiences to be young and, if possible, female. In requiring the winning proposal to 'be wide in appeal', the ABC was flagging this aspiration.

Electric Pictures was confident that ours met all the criteria, and decided to green light the development of a full-scale proposal to submit to the ABC as part of the national call out. The timelines were very short. I first took my proposal to Electric Pictures on 15 April. The ABC submissions closed on 18 May. The final proposal that I wrote with Greg Colgan, with research assistance from the in-house team at Electric, ran to some 35 pages and settled on five main characters: Kit, Archie, Keith Murdoch, and Tom Barker, with peace activist and feminist Vida Goldstein added for gender balance. Television audiences are attuned to the concept and practice of multiple narrative perspectives so a large cast was not an issue in structural terms, as it might have been in conventional history writing.

These characters would change again, right up to the final script iterations. We soon lost Keith Murdoch to Pompey Elliot; Ion Idriess was written into early scripts then deleted. The availability of sources – we required first-person accounts that could span the total war years – was the primary consideration. At the eleventh hour, president of the patriotic Australian Women's National League, Eva Hughes, was added to the cast to balance what could have been considered an overly leftist view of homefront activities, given we had two characters (Vida and Tom) representing the anti-war forces. All of these decisions involved consultation and debate over pros and cons, but no major creative conflict. I lamented the early loss of our 'black Anzac', Daniel Hodgekiss. We were determined to stick to the principle of evidence-based history, drawing all our dialogue directly from primary sources with no scripted drama, and, unable to find sufficient archival material in the limited research time available, we could not confidently put up an indigenous character.

Six months after submitting the proposal for *The war that changed us*, as the ‘The tug of war’ was now rebranded, we received the happy news that of the hundred or so proposals received in the national call out, the ABC would commission Electric Pictures to make our series under newly appointed Head of Factual, Phil Craig. Electric Pictures brought in veteran documentary maker Don Featherstone to direct the series and co-write the script with me, and James Bogle to direct the dramatic reconstructions. Professor Bruce Scates was recruited to act as a military history consultant.

Compromises in the transition from proposal to commission were few. I would not be the presenter. There would be no presenter. Rather, the visual style would have a strong contemporary cinematic feel, with actors playing the characters and voicing the primary sources and an expert/historian ‘paired’ with each of the main protagonists. There would be a neutral (male) narrator and a lyrical (female) songstress. Such decisions were made by ABC and Electric Pictures producers. I had a hand in curating the cast of historian interviewees, but no say in selecting the actors or locations. A few of the dramatic sequences were plotted out by Featherstone and me during an intensive three-day script workshop. The dramatic reconstructions were filmed over six weeks in locations around Perth in late 2013, with the port of Fremantle transformed into Station Pier and the baking Western Australian desert unrecognisable as the set for a mud-soaked Somme in mid-Winter. It was not until the early rough cuts came through in March 2014 that I witnessed the magic of an army of technical and artistic wizards transmuting words into images. The first episode of *The war that changed us* aired on 23 August 2014. The special alchemy of watching my fledgling ideas become literally embodied on screen still makes me gasp with wonder and amazement.

If this appears mawkish and sentimental, put it down to the hangover from a still-recent publicity campaign. Publicity relies on high-octane, non-stop positivity. Promoting the program is all geared towards building up an audience in a crowded curriculum of viewing options. It’s about making people want to stay home, sit down and turn on the ABC at 8.30pm on a Tuesday to invest in a four-part history documentary instead of watching *MasterChef*, or the *Biggest Loser*, or re-runs of the *Simpsons* – let alone all the other couch-potato screen choices in the digital age.

This front-foot stance is all the more endemic, perhaps even instinctive, when you are expecting there to be a backlash from certain quarters of the conservative mainstream media within the highly politicised and contested terrain of military remembrance. I received a small taste of the vitriolic public backlash against any hint of anything that might even remotely be considered Anzac-bashing when I appeared on ABC’s *Lateline* on Anzac Day 2013 and said that

[w]hat we saw in the Howard era was that Anzac Day became used as a political opportunistic tool for rallying the nation behind a particular version of Australia’s history. And the problem with that is that unless we invest Anzac Day with the

historical complexity that it deserves, the whole day risks becoming a sideshow – a circus.

Pugilistic *Herald-Sun* columnist Andrew Bolt took exception to that argument and blogged the following day under the title ‘How dare you celebrate what unites’. ‘Damn Australians for choosing to celebrate unity and sacrifice,’ he wrote. ‘Damn them for pushing back against the modish forces of division and complaint. Wright, of course, belongs to the instantly-dated Derrida generation of tricks-with-words academics trading in divisive identity politics’ (Bolt 2013). And in the Abbott era, the ABC has come under continued fire, with the Prime Minister himself accusing the ABC of not being patriotic enough. ‘I think it dismays Australians,’ Abbott told 2GB listeners in February 2015, ‘when the national broadcaster appears to take everyone’s side but our own and I think it is a problem ... You can’t leap to be critical of your own country’ (cited in Packham 2014). He followed up his criticisms of the national broadcaster with budget cuts to its funding, so-called ‘efficiency measures’, which have subsequently seen the axing of the only ABC program across all platforms devoted exclusively to history, Radio National’s *Hindsight*. Two history documentaries I was involved in developing were also let go by the ABC due to budgetary constraints.

Chris Masters, when reflecting on the making of his history documentary *The years that made us* (2012), concluded: ‘when history and television exchange vows there can be clauses in the contract that are awkward for both parties’ (Masters 2013). For Masters, mired in what he felt was a flawed creative process and a deeply compromised result, ‘the degree of difficulty meeting all objectives of being true to the history, making watchable television and drawing a large audience had begun to feel like one objective too far’. The crowded marital bed of integrity, quality and mass appeal can appear at best unworkable, at worst destructive. In particular, where commemorative military history is concerned, there was always going to be an inherent tension between the ABC’s stated aims of requiring its WWI history programming to demonstrate innovation and breadth when telling the Anzac story to new audiences – or put another way, ‘to reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community’ as the ABC Charter demands – and countering claims of left-wing bias or digger-bashing. Where would the first betrayal lie?

And yet, where *The war that changed us* is concerned, the fragile balancing act between fealty and popularity appears to have surmounted the degree of difficulty. Critical appraisal was universally forthcoming. ‘Simply a stunning achievement’, wrote TV critic Graeme Blundell in *The Australian*. ‘It reminds us that this war, and especially Gallipoli, was not only about self-sacrifice and mateship, but also fear, folly and terrible frailty. And that we have to understand this terrible conflict as a reality and not merely the convenient subject for national myth’ (Blundell 2014). Melinda Houston echoed these sentiments in her review in *The Age* under the headline ‘Why the war that changed us is fresh and brilliant’: ‘by bringing intelligence, imagination and a 21st-century sensibility to the task it both re-engages and moves us’. Houston singled out the narration, ‘which is completely free of

hyperbole’ and ‘the selection of source material’, noting that ‘three of our protagonists are women – outspoken, pro-active women – and that alone distinguishes this from just about every other World War I documentary ever made’ (Houston 2014). My original vision for a female-lead hero’s journey, solely navigated by Kit McNaughton, may not have materialised in the cut and thrust of commercialisation, but to achieve such visibility and appreciation for women’s experiences of war has been a highlight of my own excursion into the mainstream.

On a personal note, I’m very pleased to say – and I promise this is not just publicity puff – that my experience of making this series was gobsmackingly affirmative. Although there were tough times in negotiating the actual business machinations of the market – academics may be living in the post-Dawkins era of a management-centric tertiary sector but we are still not schooled to put a dollar price on our ideas – the creative collaborations proved to be exceptionally stimulating and enjoyable. British critic Justin Champion argues that ‘the new media have exercised a profound, liberating and positive impact upon research strategies and output’ (Champion 2013). In the case of making *The war that changed us*, I can only conclude that the ‘exchange of vows’ has resulted in both good history and good television: history that is complex, challenging, true to the documentary evidence, inclusive of multiple perspectives and rooted in the spirit of critical historical enquiry rather than nationalist agendas. And in television that is deeply emotionally engaging, richly evocative of a time and place and informative without ever feeling like homework. I can only hope that my fellow academic historians agree.

Endnotes

1. The place of academic historians as television producers and presenters has been widely examined internationally, most notably in the case of Simon Schama whose role in establishing the visibility of history on television was recognised in a ‘Forum’ on *A history of Britain* in the *American Historical Review* in 2009, and at a conference entitled ‘Televisualising the Past’ at the University of York in 2010 (Beck 2012: 92).
2. See, for example, Ziino (2007), Larsson (2009), Butler (2013), Lake et al (2010), and Stanley (2010). The term ‘Anzackery’ has been used by the Honest History online network to represent a ‘form of patriotic mysticism trotted out by prime ministers and old history buffers [which] simplifies complex emotions and suffocates them in a layer of nostalgia’ (Stephens c.2014). For veterans’ responses to Anzackery, see James Brown (2014) and Neil James (in Hartcher 2015).
3. Peter Beck (2012: 93) confirms the notion that television history has ‘remained a predominantly male preserve – reportedly one would-be female presenter [in Britain] was told by a television executive that “no one wants to be lectured by a woman”’.
4. From a procedural and intellectual property perspective, it is important to realise that an individual cannot receive either development funding or a commission from the ABC. The ‘chain of title’ must be owned by a production company, requiring the individual to sell or otherwise negotiate the rights to the original concept (Wright 2013).
5. Ann Curthoys (2011) has written convincingly about the way that academic histories can ‘afford to be critical, to alienate and offend’ the non-specialist audience in a way that popular (written) histories cannot. The gap is even wider when it comes to television audiences, given

the huge sums of money that are invested in making programs designed to entertain and inform.

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