

Private Lives, Public History: Navigating Australian historical consciousness

Anna Clark

[History] can be constructed at the dinner table, over the back fence, in parliament, in the streets, and not just in the tutorial room, or at the scholar's desk.

Tom Griffiths¹

Australian history has generated intense political and historiographical interest in recent years, as historians, politicians and public commentators weighed into captivating and divisive contests over the nation's past. Commemorations, museums and school syllabuses became sites of great public interest and contestation, powerful reminders of the politics of collective memory. While such discussions continue to stimulate argument and analysis in scholarly articles, opinion pieces and public commentary, little is known of their impact on the wider community. What do so-called "ordinary Australians" think about the nation's past? Are the historical questions it raises also debated in our sports clubs, living rooms and community centre kitchenettes? Does that historical concern reach out *beyond* opinion pages or academic journals, and across the garden fences that Tom Griffiths wrote about in relation to historical practice?

Private Lives, Public History was to be an answer of sorts. I had been studying Australian historiography, particularly public debates over Australian history, for many years. Yet, I increasingly came to wonder whether anyone outside its often-heated historical perimeters felt similarly engaged (or disengaged, I suspected). I wanted to research how everyday people think about history: to ponder how Australians contemplate the national past in the context of their own local and intimate narratives;

and, conversely, to try and understand people's own private histories in the context of those powerful historical discourses that dominate public debate.

In devising the project, I drew heavily on Jörn Rüsen's idea of historical consciousness as an aggregation of public historical culture, family/community historical narratives and formal history education. Historical consciousness, Rüsen insists, covers "every form" of thinking about the past, from "historical studies" to the "use and function of history in private and public life." Historical consciousness, as U.S. historian David Glassberg elaborated, asks "how ideas about history are created, institutionalized, disseminated, understood, and change over time." Taken together, these processes describe humanity's interest in its past—the ways we remember and why, as well as how we learn and engage with historical knowledge and practice.²

In particular, I was drawn to Rüsen's inference that historical consciousness explains how individuals make sense of the past as a way of understanding the present and anticipating the future—for historical consciousness is uniquely and ubiquitously human. "We all make histories endlessly", the ethnographic historian Greg Dening once mused. "It is our human condition to make histories." But what do people themselves make of their own "historicity", to use Ricoeur's term? And what do they make of the history around them?³

That historical condition certainly seems to be booming at a community level. There are tens of thousands of local history groups and museums around Australia, as well as genealogical societies and family history groups. The past is consumed widely, via heritage tours, reading groups, as well as historical fiction, film and television programs, such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* The growing digitization of archives has also enabled unprecedented access for people to research and write their own family

histories. All this has amounted to a great democratization of popular and personal historical practice in recent decades. But to what extent do those intimate pasts intersect with broader historical questions and debates? How do people navigate the *range* of history across those public and private spheres that historical consciousness implies?⁴

Several significant attempts have already been made to explore the historical consciousness of particular nations and communities—like them, I’m interested in exploring history and historiography as social and cultural, as well as professional and political. Studies conducted in the U.S., Australia, and Canada (which Peter Seixas explores in some detail in his chapter), fundamentally challenged professional understandings about who practices history and what constitutes historical knowledge. They revealed a distinct lack of community engagement with more formal national narratives, which people sense are too prescribed and disconnected from their everyday lives; and they noted a simultaneous popular contemplation of history that Australian researchers Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton neatly called “past-mindedness.”⁵

Although participants in those studies often found it difficult to engage directly with the national history they learned at school, for example, their own stories and experiences generated very strong connections with the past. Respondents kept objects to pass on to their own children or grandchildren, participated in family reunions, compiled genealogies, visited museums, heritage trails and historical societies. They talked about the past with their friends and families, and they avidly consumed history—in the form of historical fiction, documentaries, and popular history books.

In other words, as Ashton and Hamilton noted, such research sensed an uneasiness, a “Disjuncture between professional historical practice and ‘people’s History’ or history in the ‘everyday world’”. One is official and knowledge-based—taught in schools, tested in surveys, and promoted by public institutions. The other is

familiar, experiential, and tactile, and is deeply connected to people's families and communities. Yet in thinking through my own research, I wondered whether we could see that space not simply as a disjuncture, but also a possible *intersection*: do these distinct types of history ever come together? And if so, how? How do people think about their own histories in the context of a pervasive national past? And, just as critically, how do they negotiate Australian history in light of their own family and community pasts? These are the questions that framed my work and provided the rationale for its method and approach.⁶

The *Private Lives, Public History* project was significantly influenced by those larger mixed-methods studies that preceded it, but wasn't modelled on them. Instead, I wanted to "listen in" on historical conversations in an attempt to glean the ways Australians negotiate their own individual and collective historical consciousness. And for that, I needed conversations to listen to: small affinity group interviews in distinct communities. I was prepared to sacrifice the bigger quantitative data in order to capture historical dialogue that was as genuine as possible. Using what Adele Clarke calls a "situational analysis", the project mapped the voices of "ordinary people" alongside public debates and discourses, contemplating themes of historical engagement and inheritance, as well as commemoration, historical contestation, and place.⁷

Although it's well to remember that distinguishing the emblematic words of ordinariness from the public discourse they inhabit is both tricky and problematic: politicians and public commentators notoriously draw on the imagery of "ordinary" people for political traction, and as a way of enhancing their political legitimacy. Paradoxically, while "ordinary people" are constantly co-opted into public discourse, little is actually known about how they engage with the nation and how they articulate

their own historical consciousness in the context of powerful public historical narratives. Significant scholarship has examined how history is produced and publicly debated around the world, yet the ways ordinary people respond to those public narratives is much harder to gauge, as David Glassberg has intimated. Consequently, there have been “few attempts to track how the processes of historical memory play out in the lives of ordinary people”, as history educationist Sam Wineburg notes. How is it “that the proverbial person-on-the-street embodies (or doesn’t) the broad social processes posited by theorists of collective memory”?⁸

Despite the obvious problem—using such terms has the tendency to brush over their political potency—I persisted with the image of “ordinary Australians” because it is a well-worn term in the community itself, many of my own respondents self-identified as ordinary people, and I also see the term as fundamental to understanding everyday historical engagement. The participants in this study aren’t professional historians, politicians or public commentators, but they do have opinions about Australian history that warrant acknowledgement and examination.

In the end, I chose five communities that broadly reflect Australia’s geographical, cultural and socio-economic diversity: Marrickville (a municipality and suburb in inner Sydney), Chatswood (a community in Sydney’s affluent North Shore), Brimbank (a multicultural and working-class community in outer-western Melbourne), Rockhampton (a large country town and regional hub in Central Queensland) and Derby (a remote town with a large Indigenous population in far north-western Australia). This wasn’t a random or demographically representative snapshot of the Australian population, but a purposive sample of participants who came from different generations, schooling, ethnic background, and class. I was keen to include a range of

voices and experiences in these conversations, which would be critical to my exploration of historical consciousness.

Across the five communities, I interviewed twenty-three such groups, which included sporting clubs, historical or heritage societies, bush regeneration groups and art groups, as well as seniors' centres, migrant resource centres, and youth groups. The groups averaged four to five participants, which tended to generate fluent, engaged discussion, and lasted for about an hour. In total, I spoke with 100 people. The average age of the participants was forty-nine, twelve years above the Australian average. This can probably be explained by two factors. First, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australians are more involved in community groups and volunteering in middle age and following retirement, so that demographic was likely to be over-represented in the community groups I visited. Second, people tend to become more interested in history as they get older, and this was certainly confirmed in my research. In order to minimise that anticipated generational skew, I organized interviews with two youth groups from Chatswood and Brimbank, as well as students from two university classes in Rockhampton and Brimbank.⁹

There was also a significant gender bias among my participants. Only thirty-three men took part in this project. While significant numbers of both men and women participate in volunteering and community engagement in Australia, women tend to be more active in the production of family and community histories.¹⁰ As a result, women were more likely to self-select in response to my interview requests to talk about historical connectedness. To counteract the gender discrepancy that was increasingly apparent as the interviews progressed, I arranged to speak with a group from a men's shed in Chatswood and made sure I conducted one-on-one male interviews in each of the five communities.

Indigenous people were over-represented in these interviews, making up 10 per cent of all participants (they comprise 3% of the national population). Partly, this was because I was keen to explore their responses to public debates that so prominently hinge on Indigenous history—such as arguments over use of the word “invasion” to describe the European colonization of Australia, or the apology to the “Stolen Generations” (children forcibly removed from their families by successive governments during the twentieth century). Despite their historical prominence, Indigenous voices have been notably absent from the history wars themselves. Meanwhile, migrants made up about 25 per cent of the participants, reflecting the migration ratios of the broader community, and they contributed fascinating discussions about the complexity of history and identity, for example, in relation to ideas of home, inheritance, and nation.

This purposive approach to qualitative interviews—what I termed “oral historiography”—enabled me to hone in on particular groups and demographics to explore questions about historical practice that were playing out in my mind as I devised the project. I was particularly interested in whether there were distinct differences between urban and rural respondents in relation to histories of place, for example, and attitudes to Australian history between older, dominant (read: white Anglo-Saxon) and those held by Indigenous people, and people from migrant backgrounds, which have generated important vernacular counter-narratives to the “Australian story”.

Yet, I soon came to realize that this more targeted approach also had its own problems. For one thing, I couldn’t possibly explore all the different cultural allegiances and identities with such a small sample. So, the question of historical consciousness among the groups and identities I didn’t key into increasingly played on my mind. I had hoped that intersections between queer sexuality and history would emerge in the wide-

ranging discussions that the interviews prompted (naively, I can see now). And I now regret not speaking with any LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Intersex) groups, given the counter histories—to family, inheritance, and place—they may have generated. I also didn't visit any religious institutions in the five communities. I already had enough community groups taking part without including those from organized religions, and my interviewees included Christians, Muslims, and Hindus, as well as a member of a Chatswood synagogue. Yet, given the influence of religion on historical consciousness, which Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen explored in depth in their U.S. study, I wonder now whether including a deeply religious group would have offered another perspective.¹¹ Having said that, it is also clear that even with those demographic limitations mentioned above, the community-based conversations generated by this research were still wide-ranging, and they challenged assumptions that ordinary people don't have much to say about Australian history.

In their interviews, participants were asked to discuss their attitudes and engagement with the histories around them—intimate and personal, as well as national and public. Broadly, the characteristics of historical consciousness highlighted in earlier studies played out. Participants in this project confirm that intriguing historical paradox noted by others: collectively, they maintain deep historical connections day to day; they also express a distinct lack of engagement with more formal national narratives, which they consider to be much more prescribed and remote.

For example, these university students from Brimbank in Melbourne were very interested in questions of personal historical inheritance:

Katy: I have a pendant that my mother received from Ireland when she was a baby. And because it was so expensive to send things over, my aunt sewed it

into the gown of one of her baby outfits. She's passed it onto me, and I've passed it onto my daughter now.

Sylvie: That's nice.

Sandra: When I got married, my Oma gave me her wedding ring. That's pretty special.

And yet, while history figures in these participants' lives, they don't particularly sense any collective inheritance of Australian history as a national narrative:

Do any of you feel connected to Australia's past?

All: No

Sylvie: Personally, no.

Why is that?

Sandra: I think, I don't know, for me, like, we never even really learnt much Australian history in school. I can't even remember learning about explorers, I mean, let alone Indigenous Australia, or anything.

A group of youth workers in Brimbank also expressed an explicit lack of interest in an official national history:

Do any of you feel at all connected to Australia's past?

Adam: I don't feel particularly connected. Because I see myself as an Aussie and stuff, but like, my family tree and stuff just cut into Australia's history. So we weren't there from the beginning and we don't really have any Australian ancestors or anything like that. So I don't feel particularly connected, but it's interesting. It's not really a part of me so much.

Mike: The thing is, we all pretty much know the Australian history. The Hume and Hovell monument is over there [pointing], we know about the goldrush and all that stuff. But all that stuff happened however long ago, and all that stuff changes so quickly, it's just not us. We're us for us, not for what they were.

I tended to visit these communities, like Brimbank, over the course of about a week in order to contextualize the groups with the place itself. In between interviews I walked around taking notes, I read local history books, I visited community and historic sites, and I listened to the ways people talk about local history around their monuments, memorials and museums. The Hume and Hovell monument that the youth workers referred to commemorates the journey of the two famous explorers who walked from Sydney to Port Phillip (present day Melbourne) in the 1820s, and after whom the present national highway between the two cities is named. Although, the large stone cairn they referred to is located, rather perfunctorily I thought, next to a busy suburban road.

Clearly, while participants were aware of its existence, they didn't feel any strong literal connection to that history of colonial exploration. Those young Australians feel as if they have been exposed to an official national narrative, but that narrative doesn't properly speak to their own experiences—"it's just not us", as Mike admitted. It was a clear illustration of the paradox of historical consciousness that Rosenzweig and Thelen tried to unravel. But in these conversations, it seemed that many respondents were working through it themselves. A few even sought to explain why family history elicits such strong personal meaning when official histories seem to fall flat. *Do these family stories make you feel more connected to the past than, say, history that you learn in class?* I asked Manisha, a university student from Brimbank. "I think it's different," she said, "because you're connected to that history or that part

of history, rather than history as a whole, you know what I mean? That's my personal view anyway." Douglas from Marrickville said that he felt connected to Australian history "in an intimate unofficial way." But in "an official sense", he continued, "I feel totally alienated from what it means to be an Australian."

For some, comments like these verify the disjuncture between professional historical practice and popular history-making noted by several historians. In a review of Rosenzweig and Thelen's *Presence of the Past*, the late Michael Kammen argued that despite the pressure to democratize the discipline of history, everyday historical understandings are not equivalent to scholarly expertise: "family and pastness are clearly not the same as history and should not be casually conflated with it." John Tosh made a similar claim when he insisted that "thinking *about* history" and "thinking *with* history" are not the same thing. "Increasingly, the popular embrace of history is an emotional embrace," Australian historian Mark McKenna more recently added, "one that runs counter to the more critical understanding brought to the past by historians."¹²

The *Private Lives, Public History* project certainly confirmed that gap between national and intimate, public and private. Yet it also found several vital points of intersection, which confound such interpretations of a booming popular interest in the past, as public and official narratives languish beside them. In fact, it suggests historical consciousness is composed of *constant* intersections between public and private encounters with the past, such that it's sometimes hard to distinguish between the official and the intimate. *How do you feel on a historic day such as Australia Day?* I asked the Bushcare Group in Chatswood. *Do you feel connected to the past?*

Daniel: Absolutely. I think it's a great celebration. [The Bicentenary in] '88 was fantastic—you could almost walk across the harbour! It was a sensational day. One big party, I suppose, that's why it appealed.

For its history or its celebration?

Daniel: Um, well the history was when Australia was discovered—that's what they were celebrating.

Nick: Or invaded, if you want a different perspective, I do sympathize with the Aboriginal point, that this is not an appropriate day to celebrate, and that maybe we should have a different day.

National, public narratives constantly overlap with our own historical views, as this group at the Chatswood men's shed reveal in a conversation about how they felt about the apology to the Stolen Generations:

Nigel: What gets me with the Stolen Generation is that it was going on when I was alive and I didn't know anything about it, and I'm embarrassed by the fact that my parents didn't do anything about it, in a political way.

Robert: They wouldn't have thought that it was wrong. They thought that they were doing what was right at the time.

Taken together, both comments reveal the tension of historical empathy and judgement across time: Nigel is dismayed that he could have been ignorant of the Stolen Generation, and that his parents "didn't do anything" about it; Robert empathises with the historical protagonists, sensing they acted in the belief that what they were doing "was right at the time." Their conversation also reveals a significant moment of historical consciousness—between the history of Australia, and people's personal experience of that history: I see in these interviews that Australians *do* grapple with the tensions between past and present. Given the high-stakes of the history wars, that everyday capacity to understand not only history's subjectivity, but also the difficulty

of historical judgment was surprising. I also never anticipated the groups would be so gently accommodating of each other's historical differences.

Clearly, these vernacular historical attachments don't uphold the sort of historical complexity and sophistication of scholarly historians. But that doesn't mean their histories are parochial or simplistic, either: participants' interests in the past are broad and complex, they're aware of history's subjectivity, and they understand its elusiveness—that it can be remembered *and* forgotten. What's more, it's in their conversations that we are able to discern the intersections of public and private that coalesce in forming historical consciousness.

Over the last thirty or forty years there has been a great *peopling* of history—a historical “enfranchisement”, as Jerome de Groot calls it. History has become more and more inclusive, both in its content and its practice: “ordinary people” are more visible in historical narratives, and are also increasingly equipped to produce their own. This radical democratization of the discipline has challenged professional assumptions about what history is, who does it, and how. Eighty years after U.S. historian Carl Becker famously called for the recognition of “Mr. Everyman” as a historian, we might just about be there.¹³

And yet many academic historians are wary of this impressive expansion, baulking at the very connectedness so many Australians feel in relation to the histories they consume: from collective commemorations such as Anzac Day, historical re-enactments and pilgrimages, to popular histories written outside the academy. “In popular memory, the *distance* from the past prized by professional historians takes second place to being *present* in the past, to the language of immediacy, spectacle and recreation”, writes McKenna. “The boundaries that once separated history from fiction

and myth appear more blurred.”¹⁴

Yet the *Private Lives, Public History* project also reveals that these historical domains overlap continuously in everyday life. The impact of the history we learn at school, view in museums, and commemorate collectively is simultaneously shaped by our family and community histories. Contests over the past between historians, politicians and public commentators echo our own historical subjectivities.

What I wasn't able to show was why.

While the research provides an important account of historical consciousness in Australia, in particular the ways individual and collective historical narratives intersect, it raises several historical questions that demand attention. For example, the interviews reveal a profound historical pluralism across the Australian community, indicating that simplistic and divisive historical debates such as the history wars simply don't match up with people's own historical experiences. Take this quote from Deborah in Sydney's Chatswood: “Well, I think the line between history and politics is often very thin”, she observed. In Brimbank, Silvie was similarly suspicious: “I tend to think that if it's a politician, that they've got a hidden agenda”, she explained. “So I'm always sceptical if there is a public debate with politicians or with governments involved—that there is something behind it, that they're trying to convey another message, an alternative message.” And yet, if so-called “ordinary Australians” don't buy into politicized debates over the past, why does Australian history continue to generate such political traction? Despite conducting a pilot focus group interview before the project, that question of why only became apparent towards the end of writing up the research. And I think answering it requires a different sort of analysis from historical consciousness.

Further unanswered questions also quickly became apparent after the interviews. If people connect to the past through personal experience, is it possible to

have historical critique and interrogation that doesn't offend or silence other people's "pasts" and "stories"? And if they are drawn to histories that connect them, how should citizens learn about more removed, or "boring" histories that are also deemed important?

What I see now as a gap in my research is at least in part a result of the research design itself: because I wanted to populate public historical discourse with the voices of everyday Australians, the sort of critical interrogation of their transcripts required for such analysis never seemed quite right. Building on de Groot, I wanted to enfranchise my participants with this research, and produce a piece of work they would be interested to see themselves represented in, rather than critique and deconstruct their every utterance. But in taking that approach, I can now see moments in the interviews and data analysis where edgier critique might have produced some meatier answers—although would have simultaneously run the risk of offending the participants. That is surely one of the conundrums of work in historical consciousness: to what extent do we (as researchers) need to understand it as a social process, or as a way of discerning hierarchies of historical understanding? Even now, I'm not certain I have the answer to that one. Ultimately, I'm proud of this project, but I can't pretend those analytical gaps don't niggle. Hopefully, I can revisit them with a punchier set of research questions next time.

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¹ Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*, p.1.

² Rüsen, “The Didactics of History,” p.281; Glassberg, *Sense of History*, p.18.

³ Seixas, “Introduction”; Rüsen, “Tradition,” p. 45; Denning, *Performances*, p.35; Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, p.274.

⁴ Arrow, “I Just Feel it's Important”; Sear, “A Thousand Different Hands.”

⁵ Ashton and Hamilton, *History at the Crossroads*; Conrad, et al., “Canadians and Their Pasts”; Conrad et al., *Canadians and Their Pasts*; Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*.

⁶ Ashton and Hamilton, *History at the Crossroads*, p. 8.

⁷ Clarke, *Situational Analysis*.

⁸ Glassberg, *Sense of History*, p.16; Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*, p.249.

⁹ Ashton and Hamilton, *History at the Crossroads*; Conrad et al., *Canadians and Their Pasts*; Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*.

¹⁰ Ashton and Hamilton, *History at the Crossroads*; Conrad et al., *Canadians and Their Pasts*; Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*.

¹¹ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*.

¹² Kammen, “Carl Becker Redivivus”, p.234; Tosh, *Why History Matters*, pp.6-7; McKenna, “The History Anxiety,” p.580.

¹³ de Groot, "Empathy and Enfranchisement"; Becker, "Everyman his Own Historian," p.235.

¹⁴ McKenna, "The History Anxiety," p. 580.

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