

Facing facts?: History wars in Australian high schools

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On 25 January 2006, on the eve of Australia Day – the day where the renegotiation of history in Australia is most symbolic and a day full of unease for some – Prime Minister John Howard addressed the National Press Gallery. Half way through his speech, Howard announced that the history wars, in which he had been prominent from time to time since 1996, were over.¹ The ‘divisive, phoney debate about national identity’, he reported, ‘has been finally laid to rest’.² Fewer Australians, Howard contended, were now ‘ashamed of Australia’s past’ than had been the case a decade ago. In an unusually irenic tone, he went a little way towards acknowledging the damage inflicted on Aboriginal society. Proper recognition of ‘the Australian achievement’, the Prime Minister briefly noted, had restored ‘a better balance between pride in our past and recognition of past wrongs’. Having moved beyond an obsession with diversity, Australians, he asserted, ‘are now better able to appreciate the enduring values of the national character that we proudly celebrate and preserve’. Essential features of that character were loyalty, patriotism, egalitarianism, hard work, law abidance, tolerance and a respect for the country’s British heritage. For his critics, however, tolerance implied a need to put up with difference and the model Australian citizen had no guidance as to what to do when faced with unjust laws or corrupt government.

Howard’s Australianness was not shaken by the recent and internationally reported outbreaks of racist violence at Cronulla in Sydney’s southern suburbs. And he claimed that the values he espoused were underpinned by the Australian achievement,

the supposed reconciliation over the twentieth century of a 'market economy with a fair [, cohesive] and decent society'. In order to foster these values, Howard noted in his speech that the time was ripe 'for root and branch renewal of the teaching of Australian history in our schools, both in terms of the numbers learning and the way it is taught'. 'For many years', he commented:

it's been the case that fewer than one-in-four senior secondary students in Australia take a history subject. And only a fraction of this study relates to Australian history. Real concerns also surround the teaching of Australian history in lower secondary and primary schools.

Too often, Australian history has fallen victim in an ever more crowded curriculum to subjects deemed more 'relevant' to today. Too often, it is taught without any sense of structured narrative, replaced by a fragmented stew of 'themes' and 'issues'. And too often, history, along with other subjects in the humanities, has succumbed to a postmodern culture of relativism where any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated.

Part of preparing young Australians to be informed and active citizens is to teach them the central currents of our nation's development.³

Reactions to Howard's speech were both predictable and contradictory. Julie Bishop, the new Federal Education Minister, supported her leader, indicating that her preference was for an American-style of school teaching that emphasised nationalism.⁴ Conservative historian, Professor Geoffrey Blainey, said on national

television that there were ‘a lot of basic things that I think students should [know]’ including the democratisation of Australian society.⁵ Professor Stuart Macintyre, interviewed on the same program, noted that ‘we would all agree that we need to do more to restore history, but we need to make sure that that is open to diverse viewpoints and that it is not simply an exercise in indoctrination’. And this is certainly what the Prime Minister intended. Annabel Astbury of the Victorian History Teachers’ Association told the program’s interviewer that Howard’s ‘clear agenda’ concerning the teaching of history in schools ‘reveals that he really has no idea of what’s going on in the classroom’. For Astbury, it was

Harking back to a time when... learning in schools was about rote learning and memorising dates and... that was... the beginning... [of] the end of history teaching.⁶

But this, too, was in a way political rhetoric. And Howard’s notion of a structured narrative could not be reduced to rote learning and dates. He was advocating a single story, Whigish in character, as the core of the Australian saga. Some regrettable things may have happened along the way but ‘on balance’ – a key theme in his speech – this was a tale of progress and general prosperity. Given the general marginalisation of history in Australian educational and cultural institutions, however, historians and teachers of all persuasions were forced to agree with the Prime Minister, even, as did Macintyre, with reluctance. As in other countries,⁷ such a debate launched journalists into searches for members of the public who could confirm, in this case, Howard’s grave doubts about the health of historical knowledge without questioning the very nature of that knowledge.

In recent years public debates have emerged in many western societies about the role of history in national culture and society, the responsibilities of historians as interpreters of the past and questions of ownership of and participation in history. Anxieties about levels of historical literacy often focus on formal education systems since, from the twentieth century, these have been one of the principal means by which societies pass on the cultural heritage.

To date, evidence relating to the extent of interest in and public knowledge about history in this country is contradictory. Between 1978 and 1995 there was a sixty-six percent decline in the number of students taking Higher School Certificate history in NSW.⁸ But syllabi in NSW and elsewhere have made history and civics mandatory in junior years.⁹ We are told that Australians know fewer of the ‘facts of history’ than they did in earlier generations despite speculation and disagreement about the nature of facts and the core set of facts of Australian history if there is such a thing. Yet popular venues where people interact with or make their own pasts are expanding. Indeed, there is an increasing obsession with the past both personally and in a range of public forums, especially within political debate and in an increasing number of arenas in popular culture.¹⁰

Shifting or unstable histories led Prime Minister Howard to say in 1996 that Australian history was being ‘re-written’ and taught ‘as a basis for obsessive and consuming national guilt and shame’. He criticised a ‘Black Armband’ interpretation which he claimed was pervasively ‘distorting... the facts of history’.¹¹ His Government insisted on a celebratory historical perspective that told ‘the story of [all]

our people... broadly constituting a scale of heroic and unique achievement against the odds'.¹² Howard put it this way in his Sir Robert Menzies lecture:

This black armband view of our past reflects the belief that most Australian history since 1788 has been little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination.

I take a different view. I believe that the balance sheet of our history is one of heroic achievement and that we have achieved much more as a nation of which we can be proud than of which we should be ashamed.¹³

In January 1998 the NSW Premier Bob Carr argued that a shared knowledge of a common set of 'facts of history' would bind Australians of diverse backgrounds together. For Carr, it was the responsibility of educational institutions to strengthen their teaching of these specific 'facts'.¹⁴ Both leaders assumed that formal education was the principal means that determined people's knowledge about the past. Such assumptions no doubt contributed to the decision by then-Federal Minister for Education David Kemp to launch a national inquiry into the teaching of history in schools in the late 1990s. These statements and activities reflect anxieties about the shifts in historical practice since the 1970s. History became a more inclusive and democratic form of knowledge no longer tied to nationalist ends or monopolised by academics. They also highlighted increasing governmental lack of control over how people acquire historical literacy.

Despite the high public profile of debates over history and political concern over the role of history in national consciousness little is known about the ways in which

ordinary Australians learn about and value the past. While 'history wars' have been waged by academics, 'mercenaries' and ideologues, the 'civilians' whom they claim to represent seem to have been forgotten.

In 1998 the Australian Research Council (ARC) funded a pilot study carried out by us and some other colleagues at UTS. Based on an American study by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, it sought to investigate the ways in which Australians think about, evaluate and use the past.¹⁵ The term 'past' was purposefully employed to facilitate participant reflections on popular forms of history. We thought that material interpreted from this study could help us connect the work of professional historians with public historical understandings, linking history as a professional study with history as a form of social knowledge and activity. Our primary interest was to interview 'ordinary' people who had no formal interest in 'History'. This first phase of the project found that it can be misleading to assume that either official accounts or formal education determine popular consciousness of history. Many Australians develop a passion for the past through family discussions, watching films and television, and from public institutions such as museums. Compared to perceptions of what was learnt in formal educational institutions, these more personal 'funds of knowledge' form the bases of an historical education for many Australians.¹⁶

After the pilot, we successfully applied for ARC funding to undertake a larger investigation over three years from 1999. Louella McCarthy was appointed project coordinator and twenty-six part-time research assistants conducted and coded a national survey involving 350 telephone interviews (199 women and 151 men) which provided the core study as well as 150 face-to-face interviews.¹⁷ Given the length of

the questionnaire – which took around fifty minutes to answer – respondents were self-selecting. This was inevitable given its nature and scope. ‘Australians and the Past’ is thus a major study of historical consciousness in Australia around the beginning of the twenty-first century. Its context is a society in a highly conservative political climate experiencing considerable change, due to globalisation and the information revolution, that affects how we understand the very basis of social knowledge. Factors such as increasing levels of education and extensive migration have had a significant impact on our understanding of the past.

There is an assumption, clearly articulated by Prime Minister Howard in 2006, that Australians’ knowledge of history arises from formal teaching and officially endorsed accounts of the past. This rests on a view that we passively imbibe the lessons we receive from education and official contributions to public commemoration and memory-making. This notion, however, is contradicted by research in Canada that suggests that family and community knowledge which students bring into the classroom determines how they respond to formal history at school.¹⁸ This Canadian study is one of a very few which started to investigate the role of community and family learning in shaping the way the general public understands the past while raising some implications this has for classroom-based history. Drawing on the results of the Australians and the Past survey, this article examines Australian experiences of classroom history and responses to these.

I’ve always been interested in how things used to be. I didn’t find it a chore. I had a marvellous teacher in high school. He made it come alive. A lot of

people aren't interested in history when they're young. Same as some history teachers don't make it interesting enough. So it's... teacher or course and the attitude of the young.¹⁹

Experiences of history in secondary school related in the Australian and the Past survey varied greatly. Over forty per cent of our interviewees had taken history at high school. Some, such as the sixty-year-old retired woman quoted above who lived in Queensland but was schooled in Sydney, had a great affinity with history and remembered their teachers with affection. Others – for example, an English-born and schooled woman in her mid seventies who resided in Western Australia – had disliked their history teacher and found the subject ‘very boring and badly presented’.²⁰ In between these two extremes was a collection of views representing around three-quarters of survey respondents that were ambivalent about the experience of history at school. For the majority, classrooms were not places where people connected significantly with the past. Some teachers were seen as possibly partisan presenters of the past and their knowledge was at times, though not surprisingly, equated with ‘text book’ learning. Similar findings were reported for the North American experience.²¹

Attitudes towards history in high schools are clearly shaped by more than classroom dynamics. In 1997, when the New South Wales History Teachers’ Association published a lengthy report on the state of history teaching, one comment from a student leapt out at critics of history:

We did Australian history in years 3, 4, 5,6, 7, 8 and 9. It was boring. I would rather watch paint drying.²²

Defenders of history responded in knee-jerk fashion, invoking the mantra that the study of history has intrinsic value. But they did not immediately point to the role of poor curriculum development which allowed students to revisit similar content over seven years. Such an over exposure to gold rushes and Gallipoli would have deadened the interest of the most ardent student of the past.

History education in schools, as one of the many rooms in the house of history, has its own specificities. As Carmel Young has reminded us, school-based history is mainly ‘concerned with the production of learning’ as opposed to knowledge.²³ Reflections on past experiences in schools can also be influenced by later experiences and changing historical sensibilities.

‘Our own backyard’

In their northern American study, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen detected a gap between ‘history’ and ‘the past’. This reflected a seeming divide between the academic discipline of History – with a capital H – as opposed to histories which were personal, local or communal. This was apparent in responses about history in schools in our Australian survey. One respondent recalled that:

We were taught a lot of dates... we should have done more work on Australian history. I’ve had to read up myself most of what I know. Different things come up and I think – God I never learnt about that. We did war and 1788. Nothing on the Mount Morgan mine. We were never taught about our own backyard at school...²⁴

While some respondents remembered teachers drawing on their local area as a source for historical research and meanings most respondents found classroom history dull and remote. (Rosenzweig and Thelen's survey found that a common description of history at school was 'boring'.)²⁵ Conventional textbook history – dates and simplified accounts of complex, remote events and people – generally did not appeal. One respondent complained of teachers 'look[ing] one way only' at particular histories.²⁶ This instance referred to the negative depiction of Germany during the World Wars by the victors. Some of these criticisms may have been the result of more mature people projecting contemporary concerns and interests back on the past. But the overwhelming similarity of responses flags an issue for contemporary classroom history teaching.

The separation of 'History' from 'the past' was reinforced by the strong interest shown by all respondents in family history (just under 56%). This interest in the personal past did not translate into most classrooms. The dead hand of dry, empirical history was also contrasted with more imaginative approaches to the past. 'I loved history at school', a respondent told one interviewer:

Ancient more than modern – probably because it's like fantasy – and not as many dates. There's too much detail and dates in modern history, it all became a bit much for me.²⁷

The extent to which Gallipoli and governors can compete with gladiators and goddesses is a perennial challenge for the professional history teacher. Ancient Rome

may also be a long way for one's own backyard but this example serves to reinforce the importance of the question as to what constitutes history for different people at different stages in the life cycle. Positive experiences of history at school, however, can influence later interests in historical activities. Some people's hobbies and passions were subsequently structured to different degrees by their history lessons. Those who had connected strongly with school history occasionally passed this on to family members or close friends. One respondent recalled that 'history was one of my better subjects at school. My granddaughter benefited from that knowledge and interest.'²⁸ At least two others were so taken with history as a result of their teachers' enthusiasm for the subject that they went on to become school history teachers. 'I had two high school history teachers', one remembered,

who both loved history. They went into it in great depth. It wasn't just a job.

They took you on a ride and got you interested. They were animated and made it interesting. I took it on board and went with it.²⁹

'not pushing a barrow'

At times respondents' attitudes towards 'History' could be contradictory. A preference for the personal past was sometimes blurred with a desire for the authority that can stem from academic history. Some respondents gave a high ranking to their connectedness with history in school while giving a low rank to the trustworthiness of high school history teachers and visa versa. At least one respondent appears to have conflated teacher trustworthiness with a passion for the subject.³⁰ Several did not like textbook-style approaches to the teaching and learning process but insisted on the primacy of good textbooks. But while people's conceptualisations and judgements of

history and history in schools varied and shifted in different contexts a strong and consistent theme emerged from their accounts: history had to be reliable. This, indeed, seemed to be school history's greatest burden.

Teachers were taken to task if they displayed imperfect knowledge. 'They should', one respondent insisted, 'know what they're talking about'.³¹ 'Teachers', said another, 'are my main source of information about history; they are my main source of information about the past and I hope what they've taught me is right'.³² Others also placed a general faith in teachers. 'You'd hope', said one respondent, 'they know what they're talking about – you hope they've studied'.³³

Trustworthiness generally boiled down to a simple notion of objectivity. A respondent who gave teachers a high score of eight out of ten for being trustworthy felt that there

are good teachers and bad teachers – strictly speaking what they tell pupils should be spot on. There could be some slippage there and personal points of view come into it.³⁴

Professionalism also entered into this framework. Some people were of the view that school teachers were

not pushing a barrow, no skin off their nose what happened in history. They try to be reliable, they have academic degrees and are properly convinced that reliable sources are important.³⁵

Others observed similarly of history teachers: ‘Well surely they must know what they’re talking about,’³⁶ ‘They must be trustworthy. They have studied it too’.³⁷ All of these people gave high scores – eight out of ten – to teachers for their trustworthiness. At the other extreme, a fifty year old male living in Victoria asserted that teachers simply ‘didn’t have the material to deal with it [that is, the truth]. It was all lies’.³⁸

A teacher’s reliance on sources for authority was another strong theme in the national survey. Familiarity with primary (or unpublished) historical sources was raised by a few interviewees as a guarantee of a teacher’s reliability. But the power of the printed, published word was far more significant in underwriting the teacher’s historical knowledge and authority. ‘They’re as reliable as the books they use’, said one respondent.³⁹ Some people were reassured when information came ‘right out of the book’,⁴⁰ thus, apparently, removing any chance of human error or the injection of mere opinion into the received historical record. An ex-student noted that in terms of rating historical trustworthiness ‘my high school history teacher wrote our text book so I should give him a good score’.⁴¹ Some books, however, held hidden dangers. A Sydney-born man in his early forties living in Brisbane commented that the history teacher he

had was good but they’re influenced by what they’ve read and their younger years and what’s been provided to them.⁴²

One Chinese-born man in his early forties had once trusted textbooks: ‘In China history was taught only from books... teachers would read it out’. But after moving to Australia he had lost his trust in these sources of history.⁴³

For most respondents, books – or more precisely textbooks – play the same role as objects do in museums. Ideas and interpretations, the stuff of which academic historians claim to be an essential component of fine history, are at the very least suspect. Safety and reassurance is found in history’s building blocks – the ‘facts’. In the United States, such history has earned the disparaging label ‘drag net history’ based on the tag line of the star of the detective show *Dragnet*: ‘The facts, mam, just the facts’. While in one sense contradictory, this might also be seen to relate to the dichotomy between ‘History’ and the past. Capital ‘H’ history is esoteric, arcane and associated directly with academics who were ironically seen to be well supported experts whose job it was to know the past – or their specialist areas thereof – and who were rated as being far more trustworthy than history school teachers. (Only fourteen per cent of survey respondents placed history teachers in the ‘most trustworthy’ category while thirty-three per cent put academics in this ranking.) As David Lowenthal has put it, *this* discipline-based, rarified past is a foreign country.⁴⁴ *The* past, alternatively, seems to be a country in which people feel at home.⁴⁵

If history is to be successfully reinstated into school curricula, the issue of the relationship between ‘interpretation’ and ‘facts’ will need to be addressed. Some see this as a role for academic historians. But an even larger issue is that of reasserting the authority of history educators in not only education bureaucracies but in society. This will require gaining broad acknowledgement that there are a multiplicity of historical practices, all equally valid, that involve different skills, knowledges and audiences. All of these overlap but one of them is school-based history. It will also necessitate

developing a common understanding of history as an activity that is personal, literary and contingent.

History teachers and the academy

As part of the Australians and the Past project, Anna Clark undertook a small but significant survey of history teachers across parts of eastern Australia. As with the response about high school history to the national survey, teachers were clearly aware of a divide between their profession and academic historians. The academy was often perceived to facilitate scholarship and research and academics were expected to pursue these activities with rigour. Conversely, while ‘noting the different expectations between school and academic history’, the schoolteachers who Clark interviewed

also seemed particularly responsive to academic ideas and wider discussions about history. Observations about the state of history in Australia were common, as were comments about changing historical methodologies. All interviewed talked about the complexity of teaching different ‘voices’ or perspectives of the past. This seems to be reflected in difficulties teachers have noted elsewhere in teaching Indigenous history, for example, where many are conscious of problems of cultural and historical perspectives. In other words, while noting differences within the historical discipline, the teachers regarded themselves as practicing historians. This alignment, this recognition of connections within the discipline, was much stronger amongst the teachers than any sense of difference between academic and school history.⁴⁶

These teachers, however, were drawn from the elite ranks of the teaching profession. All were highly active in history teaching associations and passionate about the past. Many teaching history in Australian high school classrooms do not have formal history qualifications. A similar situation in the United States gave rise to the joke – Q: What do you call a history teacher? A: Coach.⁴⁷

Some respondents to the general survey had a sense that history teaching and indeed school teaching in general ‘was better in the old days’.⁴⁸ There was an unrealistic notion, too, that both an objective standard of history teaching and an objective body of historical knowledge existed which in some ways had slipped in recent times. Such anxieties need to be set in a broader context.

The economic crash of the late 1980s which led into the 1990s recession and paved the way for a strong conservative political environment saw the rise of vocational courses. History was not perceived to be either vocational or glamorous and the number of students taking history went into steep and rapid decline. With its tweed coat status, which it has yet to shrug off, commentators were asking: is history in schools ‘last year’s model? Is it old hat? Has it a future?’.⁴⁹ History as a discipline was also incorporated into the nationally endorsed Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) curriculum. SOSE lacked a clear focus on history in the primary curriculum which may have had flow-on affects in high school. At the secondary level, particularly in the Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory, South Australia and Victoria different modes of syllabus implementation and curriculum paradigms had a negative impact on the study of history.⁵⁰

History survived though the number of students taking history in secondary school have recovered slowly and unevenly (see Table 1). But along the way rifts between academics and secondary school history teacher became apparent. During 1998, Alan Ryan – an academic at the University of Notre Dame, Australia – asserted that history teachers were a major factor in the nationwide crisis that history was facing. The ‘simple fact’, he claimed, ‘is that children are being introduced to history by people who know nothing about it’.⁵¹ Ryan’s intervention sparked a heated debate. History educators and others accused academic historians of presuming to understand how the discipline of history operated in classrooms. Carmel Young, who was lecturing in history education at the University of Sydney, rightly noted Ryan’s ‘failure to comprehend the distinctiveness of school history’.⁵²

A National Inquiry into School History, funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, commenced in September 1999.⁵³ It was in part a response to Australia’s ‘history wars’ but it was also influenced by a number of overseas inquiries during the 1990s into historical consciousness and standards. The most substantial of these was the 1996 survey of the European Union entitled *Youth and History*.⁵⁴

The Inquiry documented and analysed the seeming declining interest in history in schools across the country, especially the study of Australian history.⁵⁵ Many, however – including the Inquiry’s authors – contrasted the situation in schools with the burgeoning historical activities in other parts of the culture. Eminent urban and public historian Graeme Davison addressed this contradiction. ‘It is strange at first sight’, he wrote,

that history should have slumped in the schools just when family history, heritage, local history and other kinds of popular history were booming in the rest of the community. Once it had been the other way about: a generation or two ago history was considered something that children ought to learn but which they might safely forget once school was over. Now it seemed, Mum and Dad were urging their offspring to forsake history for computer studies at the very moment they were taking up genealogy themselves.⁵⁶

Davison's concerns over the plight of history in schools reflected his desire in part to restore historians to their once honored role as expert and to stem the 'calculated assault on historical memory'. He pragmatically conceded that in order to achieve this, historians may have to swim with the sharks, those denizens including politicians who wish to use nationalism — an inherently conservative ideology — to instill patriotism and civic pride in an age of rapid change and perceived external threats. And he acknowledged that such an enterprise would be difficult given that history is by its very nature 'unbounded, unstable and controversial'.⁵⁷

The mechanisms identified by Davison for restoring history's place in the culture, however, were problematic. Citizenship, for example – then fashionable – was presented as an important vehicle:

The teaching of history, many historians will say, should have wider goals than the promotion of citizenship; but civic education remains the best chance in this generation for reclaiming a small share of the school curriculum for

history. Once it is back there, enlightened teachers may shape the curriculum along more generous lines to promote a history that exercises the imagination as well as the memory, embraces the world as well as the nation, and inculcates hope for the future as well as reverence for the past.⁵⁸

In the past, exponents of citizenship have been prime abusers of history. Texts, such as the *Handbook of Civics for Australia and New Zealand*, published in Melbourne during 1917 by Oxford University Press, taught civic harmony, servile obedience, loyalty to the state and self sacrifice for the greater good in the ‘upward struggle’ for the evolution of the British race in the white antipodes. Citizenship is largely concerned with, or constrained by, official dictates and official history.

Alarm from mainly conservative though also progressive quarters over supposed declining standards of historical literacy and the findings of the National Inquiry into School History prompted the Commonwealth Government to establish a \$2.3 million National History Project (NHP) in the middle of 2001. The NHP set out to ‘re-establish a clear school-based identity for what is commonly agreed to be a significant discipline, to assist in making a strong connection between the energy that exists in the community at large and the activities that go on in the school classroom and to frame the debates about school history in a more professional and considered fashion.’⁵⁹ The program was re-funded by the Federal government until June 2006 with its core activity being the provision of professional development for history teachers across the country. While extremely active, the broad impact of the NHP is yet to be determined.

Student responses

While school students were not part of the Australian and the Past national survey the questionnaire was administered to sixty school children. Half were in regional New South Wales and the others in metropolitan Sydney. Their responses were hand written. As with the larger survey, students fell broadly into three categories. A significant minority – around thirty per cent – felt absolutely no connection with the past in the classroom. (The figure for the national survey was twelve per cent.) Ten per cent of students were positive about their connectedness with the past at school. (Again, this was twelve per cent for the larger survey.) The remaining sixty per cent were neutral or ambivalent about connectivity to the past through school history.

Student attitudes towards the trustworthiness of teachers as sources of information about the past were far more polarised. Responding to the prompt: ‘tell me how reliable you think these sources are on a 1 to 10 scale where 1 is not at all reliable and 10 is very reliable’, thirty per cent nominated one for high school students; twenty per cent chose two. Thirty per cent gave their teachers a rating of eight while ten per cent were neutral.

While these high school students were much harder on their teachers than the respondents to the national survey– perhaps reflecting the immediacy of their experience as well as contemporary issue in high school history such as overly large classes – their comments and anecdotes echoed those in the national survey. Some students felt more assured of history which had ‘hard facts and objects to back it up’.⁶⁰ One student mistrusted teachers ‘because... [they] can only say what they have been taught and from their textbooks’. This respondent was, however, forgiving

noting in their defence that ‘teachers are only humans’.⁶¹ Things familial and familiar provided much more stronger connections to the past though these categories did not necessarily exclude academic history. For one student respondent, his family story tellers were his grandparents. Through them he learnt about ‘about the war’.⁶²

Relationships between different people and knowledges clearly have meanings for teaching methodologies. These are employed in a range of pedagogical programs and strategies, for example with Indigenous people, but such activities are far from universally utilised in Australian classrooms.⁶³ In a remarkable response an Aboriginal school girl wrote that her mother and grandmother passed on stories in her family which largely concerned ‘our past and our race’. This happened at family gatherings. It was in this context that she felt most connected to the past since her mother and grandmother ‘know more about our history and you feel comfy around them’.⁶⁴ In terms of the impartation of history, it seems that the family is the site where most people feel at home with the past.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Underlying contemporary conservative arguments about the teaching of history in secondary schools in an assertion that there is an objective, knowable past that all Australian *citizens* own, whether they like it or not. It is a past populated by politicians – mostly male and notable Prime Ministers – sporting heroes, heroic animals, comfortable aspects of popular culture and wars. And it is a past created around a conservative populism. Tall poppies, especially left-wing intellectuals or aloof elites, are cut down; dissent or critique of government is branded unAustralian; and class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability are marginalised. ‘Ordinary’

citizens are lauded. In conjuring up a nostalgic view of Australian history, the Prime Minister is playing to a constituency which has little understanding of History on the one hand and on the other wants History to confirm their vision of how Australian society came to be as it is and should be in the future. Thus Howard's desired textbook version of Australian history is part of the culture wars which have spread anew into schools. Resistance to this brand of history in the classroom, where historical understandings and knowledges are far more complex than the Prime Minister suggests, could at one level be read as a healthy reaction to indoctrination.

Endnotes

¹ Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003, pp3-4.

² <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/pms-speech/2006/01/25/113806866849045.html> (p6).

³ *ibid.*

⁴ ABC Newsonline, 26 January 2006, www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems.200601/51555858.htm

⁵ The 7.30 Report, ABC Television, 26 January 2006, www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2006/51556052.htm

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ See, for example, Eric Foner, *Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*, Hill and Wang, New York, 2002, pp xvi-xvii.

⁸ Paul Klem, 'The future of history?', in *Education Australia*, vol 30, 1995, pp30-7.

⁹ For example, see Paul Ashton, 'Enjoying the Mandatory Syllabus?', *Locality*, vol 7, no 2, 1994, p13.

¹⁰ See Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton (eds), *Australians and the Past*, special issue of *Australian Cultural History*, vol 22, 2003.

¹¹ John Howard, Sir Robert Menzies Lecture, 'The Liberal tradition: Beliefs and values which guide the federal government', 18 November 1996.

¹² Tony Birch, "'Black armbands and white veils': John Howard's moral amnesia", *Melbourne Historical Journal*, no 25, p9.

¹³ *The Australian*, 19 November 1996.

¹⁴ Bob Carr, 'Australia Day Ambassadors', Lunch Address, Darling Harbour, 23 January 1998.

¹⁵ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelan, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998.

¹⁶ Irma M. Olmedo, 'Voices of the past: Using oral history to explore funds of knowledge within a Puerto Rican Family', *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, vol 28, no 4, pp550-73.

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- ¹⁸ Peter Seixas, 'Historical Understanding Among Adolescents in a Multicultural Setting', *Curriculum Inquiry*, vol 23, no 3, 1993, pp301-27; Peter Seixas, 'Mapping the Terrain of Historical Significance', *Social Education*, vol 61, no 1, 1997, pp22-7. For Europe, see Joke van der Leeuw-Roord, *The State of History Education in Europe: Challenges and Implications of the "Youth and History" – Survey*, Korber-Stiftung, Hamburg 1998.
- ¹⁹ Australian and the Past Survey, interview GZ 14.
- ²⁰ ibid, MH 20.
- ²¹ Roy Rosenzweig, 'How Americans Use and Think about the Past: Implications from a National Survey for the Teaching of History', in Peter N. Stearns, Peter and Sam Wineburg, *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, New York University Press, New York, 2000, Sexias, p265.
- ²² Halse report, p91.
- ²³ Carmel Young, 'Historical Revivalism', *Australian Historical Society Bulletin*, no 88, 1999, p24.
- ²⁴ Australian and the Past Survey, interview GZ 11.
- ²⁵ Rosenzweig, op cit, p273.
- ²⁶ FW/07.
- ²⁷ GZ/21.
- ²⁸ ME/35.
- ²⁹ AP/07. The other respondent was PO/05.
- ³⁰ ME/29.
- ³¹ GZ/21.
- ³² 2LB/02.
- ³³ FW/21.
- ³⁴ FW/10.
- ³⁵ 1LB/01.
- ³⁶ FW/14.
- ³⁷ FW/16.
- ³⁸ AC/05.
- ³⁹ FW/35.
- ⁴⁰ GZ/04.
- ⁴¹ GZ/13.
- ⁴² FW/34.
- ⁴³ PH/02.
- ⁴⁴ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985.
- ⁴⁵ Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton, 'At Home with the Past: Background and Initial Findings from the National Survey', in Hamilton and Ashton (eds), *Australians and the Past*, pp5-30.
- ⁴⁶ Anna Clark, 'Teaching the Past', in ibid, p198.
- ⁴⁷ In Australia, coach equates to teachers of physical education, a number of which are allocated history classes.
- ⁴⁸ FW/12.
- ⁴⁹ Mark Anderson, 'History – the future glamour discipline?', *Locality*, vol 7, no 2, Spring 1994, p4.

⁵⁰ Tony Taylor et al, *The Future of the Past: Final Report of the National Inquiry into School History*, Monash University, May 2000, chapter 5, sections 4 and 5.

⁵¹ Alan Ryan, 'Developing a strategy to "save" history', *Australian Historical Society Bulletin*, no 87, 1998, p42.

⁵² Young, 'Historical Revivalism', p24.

⁵³ Taylor et al, op cit.

⁵⁴ Magne Angvik and Bodo von Borries (eds), *Youth and History: A Comparative European Survey on Historical Consciousness and Political Attitudes among Adolescents*, Korber Stiftung, vol A *Description*, vol B *Documentation*, Hamburg 1997.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Tony Taylor, 'Connecting with the Past: the National History Project and the revival of school history', *Public History Review*, vol 10, 2003, pp85-9.

⁵⁶ Graeme Davison, *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2000, p180.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, p274-5.

⁵⁸ *ibid*, p274.

⁵⁹ Taylor, 'Connecting', p86.

⁶⁰ HWM/01.

⁶¹ HWM/05.

⁶² HWM/03.

⁶³ Taylor et al, chapter 2.

⁶⁴ HWM/01.

⁶⁵ Hamilton and Ashton, op cit, p27.