

A photograph of a brown leather sofa on a beach. The sofa is positioned on the sand, and the ocean with waves is visible in the background. The sky is clear, and there are some small boats on the horizon. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

Once Upon a Time

AUSTRALIAN WRITERS
ON USING THE PAST

EDITED BY
Paul Ashton,
Anna Clark AND
Robert Crawford

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AUSTRALIAN SCHOLARLY

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INTRODUCTION

OUT OF THE PAST: MAKING HISTORIES

Paul Ashton, Anna Clark and Robert Crawford

Whether novelists, speechwriters, scriptwriters, biographers or historians, writers cannot escape the past. This is what we think the American writer and Nobel Prize laureate William Faulkner meant when he wrote 'The past is not dead. It's not even past' in his 1951 play *Requiem for a Nun*. Writers, like everyone else, draw constantly on the past in both the practice of everyday life and in doing their creative work. They operate in sensory landscapes which stimulate embodied and situated knowledge. Memories can be evoked by sound, smell, touch, sight and taste through objects, places and rituals. Sometimes this happens unconsciously; at other times it is a conscious act. So in one sense we are all permanently living the past in the present. The past, however, is not history. History is an ensemble of practices that use the past to make meaning today.¹

This book brings together sixteen writers from diverse backgrounds to look at how history – a discipline which generally strives for critical distance – and the past – a concept which is open-ended and useful in the present – are used in a range of genres.

It may seem a little ironic that this eclectic and ecumenical collection has been brought together by three traditionally trained historians. For out of all of the genres appearing in these pages that re-present the past, conventional history would perhaps be seen by most people to be the least, if at all, creative. This was not always the case. Great hopes were once held out for the writing of history. In his speech 'History as Literature' – delivered to the American

Historical Association in 1912 – Theodore Roosevelt, historian, naturalist, soldier, reformer and twenty-sixth President of the United States, confessed that:

There was a time – we see it in the marvellous dawn of Hellenic life – when history was distinguished neither from poetry, from mythology, nor from the dim beginnings of science ... the steady growth of specialisations has rendered such combinations now impossible.

Here, he was grappling with the question of how the humanities could attain an equal standing with science and technology, not just in universities but in public culture. Objectivity and systematic research was required to put the relatively new academic discipline of history on a scientific footing. But for Roosevelt there was an even greater need for the powerful gift of the 'imagination', as he called it, to 'take the science of history and turn it into literature'. This would allow people in the future to appreciate the full gamut of experience of those who lived now and in the past.²

History is a literary activity. But today most people do not associate it with literature. There is a clear delineation between history and 'literature' in bookshops. Within the academy, history departments are more likely to be amalgamated with politics, classics or religious studies than with literary or writing departments. Indeed, history has had bad press as a literary form for a long time. At the end of the eighteenth century, German poet, author and philosopher Novalis – Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg – wrote that 'Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history'. At the end of the twentieth century, Penelope Fitzgerald used this quote as an epigraph to her novel *The Blue Flower* which was based on part of von Hardenberg's life and has been hailed as one of the great historical novels.

Debates about history as literature have emerged from time-to-time. But by-and-large historians have failed even to get a look in as writers. Latter-day Roosevelts would have been extremely disappointed by the outcome of Dymock's top 101 books in Australia for 2015. The privately owned bookstore chain's annual poll received over 15,000 reader votes and the winners were: first, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*; second, Jane Austin's *Pride and*

Prejudice; and third, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, which won the 2014 Man Booker Prize, came in at number 31. However, the publisher's marketing blurb only described the work as: 'A novel of the cruelty of war, and tenuousness of life and the impossibility of love.' It did not mention that it was also a powerful historical novel.

In Debra Adelaide's edited collection *The Simple Act of Reading*, twenty-one writers discuss the books that shaped their worldviews and their approach to their craft. Not one was a conventional history. It would seem that, as Ian Mortimer has noted of the British experience, 'historical writing has come to be seen as functional and, in literary terms, second-rate'. But each of the essays, and the books they reflected upon, all drew, in one way or another, on history and the past. History, it seems, may be less visible but its lessons remain pertinent to writers thinking about the human condition.³

The academic practice of history has contributed to the public perception of history being rarefied, exclusive or, at worst, dull. Gatekeeping academics have heightened this. Mark McKenna, a historian at the University of Sydney who writes highly accessible and engaged history, lamented that in recent times historians had 'lost much of their earlier cultural authority'. 'A cultural space', he noted, 'has opened up into which writers of fiction are now more commonly seen as the most trustworthy purveyors of the past'. This had also allegedly contributed to the 'decline of critical history in the public domain'. McKenna argued that this was in part a legacy of the history wars which left wounded and other academic historians looking like 'cultural warriors peddling rival versions of the truth'.⁴

Most recently, academic historian Tom Griffiths bought into this debate. Rather than 'a gulf between history and fiction', he sees 'an intriguing dance around a shifting, essential line'. 'The good historian', he notes,

like the top tennis player, plays the edges and hits down that line. History's commitment to evidence that can be revisited, to a journey of discovery that can be retraced and challenged, increases the writer's artistic opportunities exponentially. Historians always have at least two stories to tell: what we think happened, and how we know what we think happened. So the

'non' in our 'non-fiction' signifies an edge that can sharpen our prose and heighten our sense of danger and wonder. It also acknowledges that there are things we don't and can't know. Silence, uncertainty and inconclusiveness become central to the narrative.

But silence, uncertainty and inconclusiveness, and 'the strangeness of the past' which Griffiths desires to recover, concerns all 'good' non-fiction writers.⁵

Thus 'critical' historians sometimes find themselves and their histories out in the cold in a 'great age of historical mythology', as McKenna put it. Ever-growing numbers of novelists turn to historical perspectives and sources for inspiration. Everywhere, individuals and groups seem to be making new pasts or remaking old ones. History, broadly and democratically defined, also continues to act as a powerful force in the culture. But it is seemingly out of the control of academics and not of their making. Is it not, however, surprising that some people had drifted away from the work of history scholars who show disdain for wide audience appeal and 'powerful popular writing' while issuing permits for permissible pasts. Ironically, the great cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) was to write that: 'The historian tries to re-experience what was once experienced by men like ourselves... The true study of history involves our imagination and conjures up conceptions, pictures, visions.'⁶

Clearly, history that's not bound by the rules of evidence, or academic rigour, and manages to collapse time so that inhabiting the past is as easy as picking up a paperback has its critics. While historical novels may make 'history vivid', as David Lowenthal acknowledges, others bristle at the suggestion that fiction can *make* or *do* history itself. 'Increasingly', Mark McKenna contends, 'the popular embrace of history is an emotional embrace, one that runs counter to the more critical understanding brought to the past by historians.'⁷

Yet that professional debate over the 'History Question', as historian Inga Clendinnen called it, doesn't seem to have muddied a booming interest in popular history produced outside the academy. By the end of 2008, for example, Kate Grenville's historical novel

The Secret River, which Clendinnen had earlier castigated for its supposed lack of rigor, had sold close to five hundred thousand copies. And while Grenville's apparently problematic slippage between 'history' and 'History' (again with a capital H) prompted significant criticism from some, it's precisely that capacity of popular histories – like fiction – to establish emotional connections to the past and recreate a believable place that makes them so successful. 'Novelists working with the past have to create historical worlds that are so richly furnished and completely realized that their readers can actually inhabit them, often for days at a time,' writes US historian David Harlan. 'To create such worlds they put down layer after layer of tiny, now almost forgotten details: how bedpans were emptied, how turnips were stored, how quilt patterns were named, how bodies were washed.'⁸

By contrast, popular historian Paul Ham provocatively argues, 'Academic historians occupy an unenviable place in the intellectual firmament.' 'With a few glamorous and brilliant exceptions... they tend to stick to their university departments, producing articles and essays that are almost universally unread.' Despite the prominent place of academic historians in political and public debates in the past, it seems they have little direct influence in the formation of historical consciousness in the wider community. In fact, adds David Harlan, popular history's success and reach has created something of a 'crisis' in the academy. 'We academic historians do not know quite what to make of all this', he admits. 'We are delighted to see so many people interested in the past, of course', but are concerned when these popular interpretations of the past are 'little more than historical melodramas, long on misty nostalgia but short on critical analysis'. In Australia, Peter Fitzsimons' books *Tobruk* and *Nancy Wake* spring to mind as examples of these.⁹

For us, however, history is not a hierarchy, as Harlan implies, but a wide spectrum of practices. As Marnie Hughes-Warrington has observed, 'there is not history apart from historical practices. Nor ... is there any logical, universal or unchanging reason to talk about one practice as "more historical" than another. If we value some historical practices over others, it is because of historical decisions. And because our views on what history is are themselves historical, they are subject to re-evaluation and change.' Academic history – an

academic discipline – is an important mode of history. But it is only one of many. And it is certainly undeniable that the vast majority of people gain their historical consciousness and knowledge from sources other than academic work.¹⁰

The family, film, television, historical novels, biography, autobiography, life writing, theatre, museums and heritage and memory places are some of the sites that engage people with the past and sometimes later leads them to some form of history making. Thus the past is a form of social knowledge, an artefact of the present and a source of legitimacy. As Alan Atkinson has written, 'the past is a fund of precedent. It can be a means of maintaining not only privilege and power but also the everyday decencies, comforts and pleasures – plus varieties of spiritual attachment – to which everyone can feel entitled by the passage of time.'¹¹

So it seems only fair that the contributors to this volume reflect the diversity of historical practice and writing. Each brings to this collection their expertise and interest in the ways we write about – and read – the past, from the most mandated of encounters – the history textbook – to the personal and aesthetic forms of fiction writing.

Debra Adelaide considers two sorts of writers: those who present 'authentic' history using fictional techniques and those who present 'authentic' fictions using historical details. In dealing with public history and the democratization of history, Paul Ashton looks at 'the practice of historical work in a wide range of forums and sites which involves negotiation of different understandings about the nature of the past and its meanings.' Anna Clark plumbs the tension between politics and the past, where political contests consume significant space in public discourses about national histories and people's understandings of them.

Advertising's use of history is the focus of Robert Crawford's chapter. However, advertisers' misreading of their audience and its relationship with the past can reap monumental reputational damage and significant financial loss. John Dale asks: 'How do you give voice to the dead and breath life into people and places now gone?', through an examination of crime writing. Ross Gibson's treatment of experimental history demonstrates that it can be anything, including embodied experience, deliberately designed

to give people an experience in which they can learn about the forces in the past. Bridget Griffen-Foley examines how history plays out in the media; Lucinda Holdforth looks at the powerful but potentially dangerous role of history in speechwriting; and Julia Horne unravels the creative process behind a search for the sensibilities of colonial tourists.

Some readers might be transported back to a high school classroom and tedious lessons by Paul Kiem's critical assessment of history textbooks. John Maynard, in his chapter, asks: 'How can Indigenous historians draw upon the past to compile and write Indigenous history? Who can and who can't write Indigenous history? Do we, as Aboriginal people, even know our own past?' Through a personal journey, Betty O'Neill considers biography, autobiography and life writing, demonstrating along the way that genres are 'minimum security prisons'. Penny Russel explores the role of family history in historical practice; Janis Wilton looks at writing about people, places and communities in localities; Garry Wotherspoon examines the role of history in the formation of a gay identity; and Clare Wright teases out the complexities of negotiating 'shared authority' in simultaneously making good history and good television.

Taken together, these chapters reveal a diversity in the ways writers, and others, draw on history to tell their stories, make political statements, instruct students and bestow inheritances to future generations, be they their own families or groups bound by a collective identity. They also demonstrate a powerful paradox – that history not only has the ability to connect, to show us a shared humanity across generations and cultures, but that the past is ultimately unknowable.

While confirming the ubiquity of the past – in film, family stories, media, politics, public institutions – these writers also reflect on the limitations of their practice in truly presenting history 'as it happened'. After all, the past is both 'a foreign country' and ubiquitously 'omnipresent', as American historian David Lowenthal famously intimated. Tom Griffiths similarly describes the 'double historical quest' to be simultaneously astonished and to understand. It's a 'tension' that 'goes to the heart of the historical enterprise', he explains: 'a tension between the past as familiar

(and continuous with our own experience) and the past as strange (and therefore able to widen our understanding of what it means to be human). In this collection we seek to canvas some of those questions in the ways we use history and the past in our writing, and in the stories we tell.¹²

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009 (first published 1966).
- 2 Theodore Roosevelt, 'History as Literature', annual address to the American Historical Association, Boston, December 1912 published in Theodore Roosevelt, *History as Literature and Other Essays*, Charles Scriber's Sons, New York, 1913, pp. 3–4, 16, 35–6.
- 3 Debra Adelaide (ed.), *The Simple Act of Reading*, Vintage Books, North Sydney, 2015; Ian Mortimer, 'History as Literature', 2007 <http://www.ianmortimer.com/essays/historylit.htm> (accessed 12 January 2016). See also James Snell, 'History is Literature', *History Today*, <http://www.historytoday.com/james-ssnell/history-literature> (accessed 10 October 2015).
- 4 M. McKenna, 'Writing the Past', 2005, www.humanitieswritingproject.net.au/mckenna.htm (accessed 1 November 2006).
- 5 Tom Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel: Historians and Their Craft*, Black Inc. Books, Carlton, 2016, p. 272.
- 6 'The Aesthetic Element in Historical Thought', in Johan Huizinga, *Dutch Civilization in the Seventeenth Century and Other Essays*, Harper and Row, New York, 1969.
- 7 Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, p. 225; Clendinnen; McKenna, 'Writing the Past', pp. 96–110. See also Grenville, 'The History Question: Response', pp. 66–72; K Mitchell, pp. 253–84. McKenna, 'The History Anxiety', p. 580. See also Curthoys, 'Crossing Over', pp. 7–18, for a discussion of popular and professional history.
- 8 David Harlan, 'Ken Burns and the Coming Crisis of Academic History', *Rethinking History*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2001, p. 169; Tony Birch, 'The Trouble with History', in Anna Clark and Paul Ashton (eds.), *Australian History Now*, NewSouth, Sydney, 2013, p. 249. See also Camilla Nelson and Christine de Matos (eds.), *TEXT Special issue, no. 28, April 2015 Fictional histories and historical fictions: Writing history in the twenty-first century* <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue28/content.htm>; Harlan, p. 185.
- 9 Paul Ham, 'The Trouble with Academic History Is That It Tends to Ignore What Really Drives Human Affairs', *The Age*, 22 March 2014, <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/books/human-factors-20140320-353nd.html> (accessed 6 May 2015). For an academic response, see also Paula Michaels, 'What Is Academic History For?', *The Conversation*, 25 March 2014, <https://theconversation.com/what-is-academic-history-for-24795> (accessed 6 May 2015); Birch, 'The Trouble with History', pp. 169–70.
- 10 Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film*, Routledge, Oxon, 2007, p. 32.
- 11 On public history and historical consciousness see Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton, *History at the Crossroads: Australians and the Past*, Halstead Press, Sydney, 2010; Alan Atkinson, 'Heritage' Self and Place', in Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton, special issue of *Australian Cultural History*, vol. 22, 2003, p. 165.
- 12 Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, p. xv; Schama, 'Clio at the Multiplex', p. 40; Griffiths, 'History and the Creative Imagination', pp. 74.1–74.16; Denning, *Performances*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996.