

## Australians and the Past: teaching the past

The *Australians and the Past* project was initiated in response to growing historical interest and awareness in Australia. This attention to the past has manifested both in local and personal histories as well as through increasing tension and debate over Australian history more broadly. School history is intrinsically situated in these discussions. Debates over history syllabuses are inseparable from the contemporary struggles and desires to represent Australia through its heritage. Indigenous histories in particular have incited most response, but migrant, feminist and comparative post-colonial units in history syllabuses have also produced significant reaction.<sup>1</sup> Teaching history, and Australian history in particular, is loaded with the political context (and contest) of articulating the national past. This paper examines the *Australians and the Past* survey in the context of school history using interviews with history teachers conducted as part of the project.

Anxiety over teaching history in Australian schools does not simply divide along political lines. Prime Minister John Howard's warning that there was 'perhaps a little too much of an emphasis on issues rather than on exactly what happened'<sup>2</sup> reiterated New South Wales Labor Premier Bob Carr's concern that history was being taught 'as a series of themes and not as a rigorous analysis of a narrative of unfolding major events'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, referring to Carr's recent strengthening of history across the school curriculum, Howard was 'pleased to note that in spite of our political differences, the NSW Premier and I seem to have the same view on this subject'.<sup>4</sup>

The cries to get 'back to the facts' are political strategies that capitalise on underlying social tensions, especially anxiety over the past; the imperative to teach 'the facts' is embedded in wider discussion and debate over Australian history. Behind the quest for relevance and facts, however, lies a string of paradoxes. The most obvious is now almost a cliché, and is key to interpreting much of the material that has come out of the *Australians and the Past* project: as a subject, history is apparently in crisis, and yet discussion and debate about the past has never been so prominent.

Many worry that history is viewed as increasingly irrelevant.<sup>5</sup> Enrolments for much of the 1990s were falling,<sup>6</sup> and students have been under pressure to take more vocationally oriented courses such as psychology, economics or legal studies. Debate has been heated over reasons behind the apparent decline of the subject, and considerable government spending has been provided for national history projects and programmes.<sup>7</sup> While historical illiteracy was apparently inexorable, the subject became more controversial than ever. A number of issues have fuelled the unprecedented debate over Australia's past, and how it should be taught in schools. Most overtly, perhaps, were the Mabo decision in 1992 and subsequent Native Title legislation, which attempted to accommodate Indigenous land tenure. Overturning the

historical assumption of *terra nullius*, Mabo implicitly questioned the legitimacy of European ownership in Australia. The growing prominence and awareness of policies of forced Aboriginal child removal into the 1970s had a similarly significant impact on public discussion. Questions of compensation and due historical acknowledgement of the stolen generations sparked considerable debate. A number of history syllabuses dealt directly with these emerging complex issues, challenging and problematising motives behind colonisation and its consequences. The response to these documents has been at times overwhelming.

### **'Invasion' and 'Settlement'**

In 1994 a new Queensland year five Social Studies sourcebook in a state-wide trial was 'exposed' by the Brisbane daily, the *Courier-Mail*, for suggesting that 'explorer', 'pioneer' and 'discover' are value-laden terms.<sup>8</sup> The sourcebook had been introduced to replace an earlier text, removed in 1992, because it was deemed racist and discriminatory by the Education Department. An information sheet in the sourcebook, which was sent to all schools, outlined the views presented by the Department's draft support material:

Terms such as **discovery**, **pioneers** or **exploration** should be used in their historical context. With approximately 40000 years of **occupation** of Australia, **Indigenous** people had already discovered, explored and named all parts of the continent. Various parts were re-named by **European explorers**. [...]

Many **Aborigines** and **Torres Strait Islanders** interpret the **arrival** of the First Fleet and the subsequent spread of **European settlements** as an **invasion**. Many **non-Indigenous** people, including a considerable number of historians, agree with the application of the term 'invasion' to some of the events which have taken place since the **transportation** of **convicts** and the establishment of the **penal colony** in 1788. Others argue that the terms **colonisation**, **non-Indigenous occupation** or **settlement** accurately describe the same events and actions.<sup>9</sup>

The State Opposition Leader, Rob Borbidge, said the book was a disgrace: 'This is just the tip of the iceberg of the effort to make our entire education system politically correct and many stupidities will have to be weeded out.'<sup>10</sup>

Responses from the Labor Premier, Wayne Goss, contradicted his own Education Department. The attempts to replace 'inaccurate and misleading'<sup>11</sup> representations of Indigenous people by the Department were rejected by Goss, who argued that terms like 'invasion' went too far. There was a need to present Australian history honestly and fairly, he said, but 'this does not mean that we need to reinvent the language':<sup>12</sup>

I think just about all Australians would not regard what happened in 1788 as an invasion.

There is a world of difference between the arrival of the First Fleet and what most people understand as an invasion.<sup>13</sup>

Goss contended that his own position was informed by a concern to teach ‘the facts’ so that students could ‘make up their own mind as to whether they regard the events of 1788 as an invasion or settlement’.<sup>14</sup> Yet such a demand ignored the premise of the Queensland text, which included an endeavour to encompass and analyse differing historical perspectives of European colonisation (ie. ‘invasion’ *and* ‘settlement’). Moreover, the criticism overlooked the fact that the previous sourcebook, in spite of its significant shortcomings, itself had used ‘invasion’ to describe the establishment of the Australian colonies.<sup>15</sup> Goss was obviously under public pressure to distance himself from the rewrite his own government had commissioned. The vast majority of correspondence to the *Courier-Mail* displayed disbelief and anger that European colonisation could be construed as anything but ‘settlement’; ‘invasion’ was simply an unhelpful term of political-correctness. Geoff Temby from Hamilton wrote in and complained of double standards:

What about the British people who were forcibly transported here in chains, and their descendents? Are they invaders? And what about the Europeans and Asians who have been encouraged and financially sponsored by governments to migrate here? Are they invaders?<sup>16</sup>

Another correspondent, Barry G. Shield, maintained that the reluctance to use terms from a proud pioneering history was misplaced and ill-founded:

That Mitchell, Leichhardt, Stuart, Oxley etc were going where countless other feet had trod does not detract from the fact that, as far as the Europeans were concerned, they were exploring new territory, and were thus ‘pioneers’.<sup>17</sup>

When the debate flared again six years later after the release of a new syllabus, correspondents were equally dismayed:

To omit people such as Captain Cook, Robert Menzies and many others from the teaching of history is ludicrous. We are trying to instil national pride and feelings of self-worth in our youth but are denying them the most important part of their heritage. The settlement of Australia was not an invasion but an extension of man’s eternal quest for expansion. This is part of our history and should be taught to all, without political or religious bias.<sup>18</sup>

There were a few letters supporting the new curriculum document. Many were from teachers.<sup>19</sup> Generally, however, the editorial and letters pages of the paper were dominated by the anti-invasion faction:

History is best when viewed from every available perspective [argued one editorial]. This requires judgement, and a high level of general knowledge of

events and policies then current. It is not a discipline well served by populist simplicity.<sup>20</sup>

If anyone knew about populist simplicity it would have to be the *Courier-Mail*. During the subsequent debate, there were a number of letters we have access to that were sent to the paper in support of the Queensland School Curriculum Council, but were never published.<sup>21</sup>

There were similar experiences in other states. The Liberal Minister for Education in New South Wales, Virginia Chadwick, was condemned at the 1994 National Party State Conference for allowing the word ‘invasion’ to be included in the new primary social studies syllabus in place of ‘settlement’.<sup>22</sup> A delegate who initiated the motion said there was no need to change the way that Australian children had been learning for two hundred years: ‘The wording as is—settlement instead of invasion—portrays the idea white man came into Australia and settled without the idea of invading the country.’<sup>23</sup>

The draft was consequently toned down. ‘Invasion’ was removed from some sections of the syllabus and replaced by more neutral terms, such as ‘arrival of British people’ and ‘before 1788’.<sup>24</sup> In response, the New South Wales Teachers’ Federation threatened to ban the syllabus. Then in Opposition, John Howard accused the Federation of attempting to distort the past to make a ‘contemporary political point’. Its members were guilty of ‘ideologically driven intellectual thuggery’.<sup>25</sup> ‘The description “invasion”’, he later maintained, ‘should never have been in the syllabus in the first place.’<sup>26</sup> The word ‘invasion’ challenged the legitimacy of Australia’s foundation. Recognition of that illegitimacy in History syllabuses extended the concern about changing approaches to Australian history into the realm of public education. Speaking with the populist talkback radio host John Laws after his election in 1996, Howard denounced the ‘Black Armband’ curriculum:

To tell children whose parents were not part of that treatment, to tell children who themselves have been no part of it, that we’re all part of it, that we’re part of a sort of racist and bigoted history is something that Australians reject.<sup>27</sup>

In Victoria, the shift in syllabus emphasis was perhaps more astonishing for its transparency. In the unit of Koori History in the 1991 VCE *History Study Design*, for example, the syllabus suggested that

in order to retain control of their unique cultural identity, Koori people have responded in a variety of ways to continuous pressures to disperse and assimilate since **the European invasion**.<sup>28</sup>

By 1996, the same unit read:

In order to retain control of their unique cultural identity, Koori people have responded in a variety of ways to continuous pressures to disperse and assimilate since **the British settlement**.<sup>29</sup>

It is no coincidence that the syllabus overhaul began directly after a state election and change of government. (When the Liberal-conservative government under the autocratic Jeff Kennett was elected.) Emphasising concepts of ‘power’, ‘race’, ‘gender’, ‘class’ and ‘ideology’, the rewrite also coincided with increasing conservative concern that the VCE curriculum was politically biased.<sup>30</sup> By the 1996 syllabus, however, the aim to develop an understanding of ‘those concepts [of race, class, gender etc] related to the field of history’ had been well and truly abandoned.<sup>31</sup>

This sort of contest over what ‘our children’ should know has been played out over and over again in state departments and in public fora across the country. Debates over Australian history teaching generate considerable public and political interest. The production of history syllabuses is an explicitly political act. And the right to determine what ‘our children’ should know seems to drive an ongoing tension over content inclusion and exclusion, as well as drafts and rewrites of the syllabuses themselves.

## **The Survey**

It is in such a context that the *Australians and the Past* survey was initiated, and its results both reflect the tensions of historical scholarship in Australia today, as well as shed light on assumptions about what history means. A number of history teachers were interviewed as part of the project, and this paper analyses their responses in light of the wider survey. The project as a whole notes tendencies and patterns in historical awareness, particularly ideas about what constitutes history. There seems to be a general perception that an interest in history as a subject is somewhat different from an interest in the past. Such views are revealed in the very high importance given to Australian (58.17%) and family history (55.87%) by the respondents, but only moderate status given to history teachers in terms of their ‘trustworthiness’ and as ‘people who feature in historical narratives and sensibilities’.<sup>32</sup>

These results reflect the popular opinion that history in schools, and Australian history in particular, is repetitive and uninteresting. One particular comment, from a student in 1975 is typical of this anecdotal evidence of students being disengaged from the subject:

We wasted too much time learning Australian history, about which there is very little of interest to learn. It is time we faced this fact instead of trying to pretend that Australia has had a very interesting history. A better idea might be to learn more about the world around us rather than confining ourselves to Australia's own rather narrow horizons.<sup>33</sup>

Such disappointment is matched by this rather well-known statement from a student participating in Christine Halse’s research into the state of History in New South Wales secondary schools published in 1997: ‘We did Australian history in years 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9. It was boring. I would rather watch paint dry.’<sup>34</sup>

The apparent distinction between History and history, between understandings of History as scholarly and academic and written, and more personal, even intimate, experiences of the past, seems to drive a lot of the responses in the wider survey. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen's similar study about how Americans understood history also noticed this 'separation' of histories.<sup>35</sup> 'Boring', Rosenzweig later described, was the single most common word that respondents associated with history in school.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the popularity of Australian and family history in this rather personal and unacademic context reflects distinctive understandings of what history means to many Australians. As such, while many respondents found themselves involved with the past (as members of heritage societies, active museum members or studying family history), the other history (the professional or scholarly history) did not prompt a particular feeling of connectedness. It is difficult to know how helpful this distinction actually is: in one sense, the separation of being interested in 'history' and interested in 'the past' points to an intriguing gulf between people's associations with the past and understandings of what constitutes history; but in another, such distinctions may lead to the discussion of 'history' and 'real history'—a separation that problematically posits popular interest in the past alongside (but not within) a more rigorous understanding of an academic historical discipline.

The responses from history teachers themselves, although limited in size and scope, are particularly interesting in light of this wider, apparent separation of 'history' and 'History' (or as Rosenzweig and Thelen put it, between 'history' and 'the past'). In the small group of history teachers interviewed for this project, the sense of distinction between histories was present, but not paramount. First, like some of the general respondents, teachers did note a gap between themselves and academic historians. Universities were frequently seen to have more access to resources, and a greater expectation of original research and scholarship. Such ideas may relate back to what Carmel Young has termed the difference between academic production of knowledge, and school production of learning—a distinction, she has argued, rarely acknowledged in Australia.<sup>37</sup> Second, while noting the different expectations between school and academic history, the schoolteachers in the project 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.<sup>38</sup> 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.

At the same time, however, while the teachers were aware of their distinctiveness as practicing historians, they, like the masses of people interviewed, had very personal interests in the past that drew them to the subject. One teacher in Tasmania had a photo wall in his living room, showing images of his family since the 1860s, and had recently been to England to trace his ancestors. Another, a South Australian teacher, had a family songbook she was keeping to pass on to her children. A Melbourne interviewee, who studies history part-time, in between teaching senior history, has a watch of his grandfather's he'd like to pass on. All the teachers interviewed gave the histories of their family and of Australia as most important. This exceeds the typical responses from the wider survey group. Furthermore, all of them seemed to devour history. Overwhelmingly, the teachers listed an enormous range of movies and books about the past that they had recently seen or read. They had watched numerous television documentaries about the past and frequently visited historic sites. (A Queensland teacher said he had been to at least 150 museums and sites during the last 12 months.) The teachers interviewed as part of this survey seemed to have an insatiable appetite for history.

Perhaps most significant was a real desire amongst the teachers to translate their particular passion for history into the classroom. They talked about their own connectedness to the past, and how they wanted to pass that on. The teacher from Melbourne frequently said that he wanted to get his classes 'to make sense of the past', and he related the way he wanted to repeat to his students the impact that studying history and loving history had made on him. A South Australian teacher said she often took her students to historic sites to 'see the actual physical remains'. 'It's all about imagination', she said, about 'whether you can empathise.' So while there seems to be this popular distinction between history and History, while there is clearly a perception of differing understandings of and approaches to the past, what is in fact most interesting is the way that history teachers have negotiated a space for themselves in all of this. It seems that they view themselves both as practitioners of history and connected with this more personal and popular sense of the past.

Finally, it should be noted that the teachers interviewed for this project were contacted through the History Teacher Associations in various states, and they were obviously active teachers, and active in their associations. Many commented on the impact of the amalgamated subject Studies of Society and Environment, which incorporates history. Many were very concerned about the state of history in their particular school, and were aware of the sense of historical controversy their subject provoked. Some also spoke of current historical debates in terms of the 'Black Armband' debate and the 'Stolen Generations'. In this sense, they might not be 'typical' teachers. Many teachers teach history with no background in the subject. Many are hopelessly under-resourced and must teach through restrictive curriculum and timetable constraints. On the other hand, they might well be

typical. They certainly share the typical interests in personal experiences of the past identified in the wider survey group.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance: Kevin Donnelly, 'Understanding Australia', *Agora* 31, no 2 (1996); *Courier-Mail*, 16 February 1994; and Andrew Bolt, 'Class Revolution', *Courier-Mail*, 10 June 2000: 'The tragedy is that it is deeply flawed by some of the fundamental academic theories that have already so devastated our universities—postmodernism, feminist students, moral relativism, Deep Green pantheism, blah, blah, blah.'

<sup>2</sup> Denis Shanahan and Guy Healy, 'PM's timely history lesson', *Australian*, 28 April 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Carr, 'Carr on History', *Teaching History (NSW)* 29, no. 4 (1995): 18-19.

<sup>4</sup> Shanahan, 'PM's timely history lesson'.

<sup>5</sup> John Aquilina, 'Keynote Address to HTA Annual Conference', *Teaching History (NSW)*, July 1992; Ian Gray, 'The Decline of Senior History: What Can Be Done?', *Agora* 30, no 4 (1995); Rosalie Triolo, "'Is History Relevant?'" - Yes. Civics and Citizenship Education Perspectives in the Teaching of History', *Agora* 35, no 3 (2000).

<sup>6</sup> Gray, op. cit.; Peter McPhee, 'The Historical Profession and Public Discourse (Keynote Address to HTAV Conference, 2 August, 1995)', *Agora* 30, no 4 (1995).

<sup>7</sup> See: Alan Ryan, 'Developing a Strategy to Save History', *AHA Bulletin* 87 (1998), and the replies in *AHA Bulletin* vols 87-89. Civics and Citizenship programme, \$2.3m to the National History Project...

<sup>8</sup> Melissa Ketchell, 'Explorers Axed in "Correct" Syllabus', *Courier-Mail*, 7 February 1994.

<sup>9</sup> cit. Ray Land, "'Furore over Invasion Text": Introduction to the Politics Process and Players', in *Invasion and After: A Case Study in Curriculum Politics*, ed. Ray Land (Griffith University: Queensland Studies Centre, 1994), 7. Original emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> Tony Koch, 'Furore over "Invasion" Text: Govt Refuses to Intervene', *Courier-Mail*, 8 February 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Land, "'Furore over Invasion Text'", 1.

<sup>12</sup> Tony Koch, 'Goss Cans "Invasion" Textbook', *Courier-Mail*, 9 February 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Julie Lewis, 'Goss Repels "Invaders"', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 February 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Craik, "'Was this an Invasion?": Framing History in the Media', in Ray Land [ed.], *Invasion and After: A Case Study in Curriculum Politics*, Queensland Studies Centre, Griffith University, 1994, p 51.

<sup>15</sup> *Primary Social Studies Sourcebook Year 5* (Department of Education, Queensland, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Geoff Temby, 'Letter: More Invaders?', *Courier-Mail*, 11 February 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Barry G. Shield, 'Letter', *Courier-Mail*, 15 February 1994.

<sup>18</sup> Ted Wilson, 'Letter', *Courier-Mail*, 13 June 2000.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Glenda McGregor, 'Letter', *Courier-Mail*, 13 June 2000: 'It was with some bemusement that I discovered that, as a teacher of social science, I was about to become a Maoist revolutionary.'

<sup>20</sup> Editorial, 'Our History: It Needs to Be Fully Understood', *Courier-Mail*, 10 February 1994.

<sup>21</sup> Queensland School Curriculum Council website, <http://www.qscc.qld.edu.au/kla/sose/faq.html#updates>, accessed 15 January 2002.

<sup>22</sup> 'Nats Condemn Minister's "Distortion" of History', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 June 1994.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Wilkins, 'Nationals Condemn Chadwick "Invasion"', *Sunday Telegraph*, 19 June 1994.

<sup>24</sup> Julie Lewis, 'Teachers Threaten Syllabus Ban', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 June 1994. See also Alan Barcan, 'History in Decay', *Quadrant*, (July 1999). Analysing the language of History syllabuses, such as the use of 'invasion', provides a valuable insight into how history teaching is defined in terms of wider social discussions like the Black Armband debate: *History Stages 4-5 Syllabus* (Board of Studies NSW, 1998); *History Syllabus Years 7-10* (Board of Studies NSW, 1992); *Modern History Stage 6 Syllabus* (Board of Studies NSW, 1999); *Modern History Syllabus* (Board of Studies NSW, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told? A Personal Search for the Truth About Our History* (Ringwood: Viking, 1998), 160.

<sup>26</sup> Editorial, 'An Invasion Indeed', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 June 1995.

<sup>27</sup> cit. Judith Brett, *The Age*, 8 November 1996, A15.

<sup>28</sup> *History Study Design* (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 1991) 75. (My emphasis.)

<sup>29</sup> *History Study Design* (Board of Studies Victoria, 1996). (My emphasis.)



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<sup>30</sup> *History Study Design* (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 1991) 2; Interview with Kevin Donnelly, 20 May 2002. Notes in possession of author.

<sup>31</sup> *History Study Design* (Board of Studies Victoria, 1996) 6.

<sup>32</sup> AUSTRALIANS AND THE PAST

<sup>33</sup> 'News and Notes', *The Australian History Teacher* 2 (1975): 21.

<sup>34</sup> Christine Halse et al., 'The State of History in New South Wales', (Sydney: History Teachers' Association of New South Wales, 1997).

<sup>35</sup> Roy and Thelen Rosenzweig, David, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> Roy and Thelen Rosenzweig, David, 'How Americans Use and Think About the Past', in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Same Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 273.

<sup>37</sup> Carmel Young, 'Recasting School History: For Better or for Worse', *Public History Review* 7 (1998).

<sup>38</sup> Halse, 'The State of History in New South Wales'; Lisa Kearns, 'Black and White Renaissance', *The Age*, 25 October 2000.