

Current Trends in Historical Research

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In the U.K, as we've heard, history on TV has been a great hit. But some at least of the academics have been very critical of what has been produced. They still say it is superficial, unsubtle, not good at providing context and if you can't do that, you can't really explain anything, and sometimes it is plain wrong. They're also annoyed with Simon Schama and David Starkey for talking still too much about kings and queens and battles. But as Liz says, if you're going to be intelligent about history in England it's hard to ignore them. Part of the hostility comes simply from jealousy of the success of Simon Schama and David Starkey. That is a factor that's not going to come into play here. The academy is so dull that we haven't produced a Simon Schama. We haven't even produced a David Starkey, though there are plenty of academics in cardigans who are giving rather breathless lectures.

My own position is that I don't think the academy and the makers of history on film have to be at odds. There are several developments in academic history which are actually bringing the academy closer to film. The academy is now suspicious of grand explanations of the nation's development and suspicious too about the concept of the nation and the sort of forced unity that it implies. It's now standard procedure to break down the nation into its divisions by class or gender or race or ethnicity. There is a search for particular experience. When I started as a historian, I would have said we were interested chiefly in explanation. I think now there's a much greater interest in experience: what was it like to live through this or that. So this is bringing the academy closer to film history which everyone seems to agree requires human stories, particularities of people and place and not abstractions. My colleague Jim Hammerton and his co-author Alistair Thompson have just produced a book called *Ten Pound Poms* on the British component of the post war migration program. Thirty or forty years ago, such a study would have been conceived as an exploration into public policy or administration. Now this book is concerned overwhelmingly with experience. Why did migrants choose to come, what did they make of their lives here, why did some go back, what do they now think of themselves as Brits or as

Australians or what mixture. These authors operated chiefly by oral history; they produced a huge database of informants and transcripts of the interviews. This is academic research made, as it were, for film and I know Alex has been very impressed by the book and thinks it may be a documentary.

Australia as a physical place is also being broken down. Historians are now more interested in how people relate to particular places and not simply particular places in the country or in the bush. There is a history of the Australian backyard, which is not to be confused with the front garden. Why there is that division is a very interesting thing to explore itself. The front garden shows we've been a nation of aspirationalists from the beginning almost. Everyone who had a bit of land in the front of their house wanted to make it look like a middle class suburban villa in England. And the English middle class were imitating country house gardens of the aristocracy and gentry. I think the experience in Australia which most blew my mind was seeing Italians growing tomatoes in their front garden. That showed us how people coming from a peasant culture relate to land. All land is to be used for productive purposes. So the front garden and the backyard distinction disappeared. Tom Griffiths, an ANU historian, has been very interested in interaction between people and forest and fire—which is one theme that embraces both the Aboriginal and the European history of this country. And I think a theme which is just made for film.

The other thing to say about academics and their so called suspicion of film is that academics here, much more than in the U.K., are all teachers and we know that to get students' attention and actually to get them to start understanding, you can't do better than tell a particular human story. So I don't think they'll be suspicious about particular human stories. In a course that I've been involved at La Trobe on Aboriginal history, one of the things we get the students to do is read one Aboriginal biography. There are now hundreds of these, all very revealing. The one that sticks in my mind is *Over My Tracks* by Evelyn Crawford. The most arresting part of this book is the story of how a group of children avoided being taken away from a mission in New South Wales. The mother and father of the family left the mission by the roads as a sort of decoy. They put their own children and other light skinned children, who were liable to be taken on the next round up, in another horse

and cart. The children had to go across country cutting the wire fences as they went. They had to keep in touch with the mother and father and they lose touch. These are kids of ten or twelve in charge of younger children. It's a story of escape and adventure. When I read that, I thought I haven't read a story like this since Biggles or prisoner of war stories. You don't think of Australia having these sorts of stories.

So I think there's a rich mine in particularities of people and place. But I myself think that the academy has moved too far in its suspicion of nation, as a culture and as a place. Of course we have our divisions. But are we to say Australia is just an agglomeration of different classes, genders, ethnicity and races? You can say that about every nation. Even Japan can be divided up. The United States is a more diverse society than Australia. Italy is a diverse society. Are we saying that we can no longer talk about a national culture which gives a certain style and outlook to all its people which overrides these other differences?—or which these other differences willy nilly have to live with and interact with. I myself am still a believer in national cultures for otherwise we wouldn't need guide books which have those first 3 pages on history and culture. When you go elsewhere, you need to know how to behave. But I don't think that you'll understand or get to either a definition or an explanation of Australian characteristics by starting at the beginning of the history and going through to the end. I think here more than in most other national histories, the great public events or what we've chosen to call the great public events don't uncover the mystery. A distinctive society has certainly evolved here but the evolution has been quiet and undramatic. But paradoxically I think this gives film some opportunities. I was very impressed by Michael Moore's approach in 'Bowling For Columbine'. He starts with a puzzle. Why are Americans attached to guns, and he produces a mixture of talking-head experts, archival footage, his confrontational interviews, and comparisons. Do you remember? There's quite a long comparison with Canada. The sort of thing you'd see in an academic paper. Canada is next door, the people are European but they've had a different political culture. So how is that played out in the question of guns. It is really quite a subtle examination. Lots of factors are kept in play and the film is energised by the questioning narrator—not the voice-over, but someone who wants to solve the puzzle. If we want to understand Australian history we could ask similar sorts of questions. Here is a short list of them. Why has the migration

program since World War Two been a great success? Against what you might have predicted, knowing what we know about old Australia. There's plenty of archival footage, plenty of visuals, there are migrants still to interview. There are experts to interrogate. Another question is suggested by Michelle Arrow, who's written on her experiences with 'Rewind'. They did a program on Ned Kelly's skull: is this skull a real skull? As Michelle reports, they didn't really have the opportunity to ask the question, why do Australians find Ned Kelly so significant. That would be a very interesting exploration. And as you explored you could raise the question of course about gender differences. Is it women who think Kelly was a thug and crim and blokes who admire him? I would think not. But we do know there are some people who think he's just an ordinary criminal. It seems to me very stupid view. Another question. An early feminist historian of this country said Australian women are the doormats of the western world. Is she right? Would she still say that? What's happened in the last thirty years? If it was true, why was it true? Feminism seems to have had great successes in Australia. If that's true, how can the first comment be true. There'd be lots of interesting different things to explore. Do Australians make good soldiers? And if so why? I've often thought that the place to begin with this is the cliffs of Gallipoli and the story, the wonderful story, of this great colonial achievement of the men managing to scale those heights. And the film begins with the account of those who ran down the cliffs and wouldn't face the fight. Which of course raises the question immediately about making generalisation about soldiers. My own view is that I think World War One Australian soldiers were good soldiers but probably no better than Canadians or New Zealanders. The Brits had the notion that the colonial soldiers generally were better than their own. So I think there's lots of opportunity working in that mode which is not story. I'm greatly in favour of stories but I don't think we should say that documentaries can only do stories. Michael Moore shows that it can do puzzles.

I wanted to speak briefly about Manning Clark who has the reputation of being the greatest historian in recent times. He began at the beginning and went on til the end, or almost to the end; his six volumes end in 1935. But increasingly his volumes were structured by leading characters. Not because these characters are necessarily influential, but because they embodied a certain world view and some idea of what Australia should be. He worked in pairs of characters. The opposing pair of characters become the sort of spine

of the book. So you have Governor Macquarie who encouraged ex-convicts and opposed to him John Bigge the British Royal Commissioner, the trouble shooter or enforcer, coming out to see what has happened to the colony under Governor Macquarie. Poor old Macquarie thinks this man has come to praise him because he's done a wonderful job. Gradually he works out this man is here to do him down and to tell him that he's lost the plot. This place is not a place to encourage ex-convicts. And there's the great dramas of the Macarthur family versus the Wentworth family: Wentworth trying to marry into the Macarthurs and being turned down and then for a long time being at odds with the Macarthurs. At the end of the nineteenth century there are the different views of Australia of Henry Lawson and Alfred Deakin. Now Clark has been criticised, sometimes by me, for simplifying his characters, chiefly in the interests of drama. So there you are, it's ready-made for film.

I don't think that the academy is the enemy of this project. I think the academy can contribute a lot to it. More than that, film might find new ways of exploring our history. It is a hard history to penetrate and I don't think the historians in their books can say they've said all that has to be said. Film, especially with its new willingness to explore different modes of film-making, may convey insights that have eluded the people in the academy.