

Is Australian History Good For You?

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Thanks for the invitation and the opportunity to speak here today. I'm here because I teach and research Australian history. But I'm also a historian in travel. It struck me thinking about today that history and travel actually have quite a lot in common. In fact about this time last year I participated in a similar event, a BBC workshop which was all about how to do *travel* on TV (over a very nice dinner at Otto's in Woolloomooloo—not casting aspersions on lunch today).

Both history and travel *can* as we know make very good television. They both mix pleasure with “instruction”. Both travel and history have this reputation, on one hand teaching something, but also being entertaining. And secondly they both have the attraction of making connections between what's familiar and what's strange and exotic. And so with travel we visit unfamiliar places, with history we visit unfamiliar times, and we are making connections from the here and now to the there and then. It's those two tensions—between instruction and entertainment and between the familiar and the strange—that I want to think about now.

I'm not going to offer very many suggestions. Michelle's going to suggest some themes which film might explore, and John has already suggested some particular areas in which film might be productively made about Australian history. But I want to think a bit more generally about—in a sense—the *problem* of Australian history. I think we all agree that history should and very often does make good television, good film. But I think we're also agreed that when it comes to Australian history it often falls flat.

I think we need to consider what we're up against. Where I teach at Sydney University, we always have a problem of attracting first year students to Australian history. Medieval, European or American history look so much more exciting. As they go on, by fourth year, Australian history's easily the most popular area that they study. But getting them interested in first year is always a problem. Of course we fondly tell ourselves that that shift has to do

with the quality of teaching. But it's not that and I think the sort of evaluations we do, as teachers, can tell us something about what this resistance is.

I just want to quote a couple of student evaluations, the sort things that they've written in open-ended questions asking what the course was like for them. These are some real evaluations. "I never thought that Australian history could be interesting". Another one—"The content of the course was very interesting, as Australian history is normally taught in relationship to Gold Rush and convicts or to the Australia home frontier in World War One". A third—"I actually did the course was not because I really wanted to, but because as an Australian I felt morally obligated. It has in fact been one of the most satisfying history courses I've done."

That is, these students coming to Australian history from some sense of duty, expecting that it's going to be good for them and they're surprised to find it's actually enjoyable. And they come thinking it's familiar and boring and are surprised to find it's strange and interesting.

And these prejudices are really, I think, ingrained not only in students, not only amongst school children, but further through the Australian community. And they're also prejudices that are also quite different from what normally attracts those audiences to other kinds of history. What attracts people, for example, to ancient history, which is now the most popular sort of history course being taught at school? It's certainly not relevance. When it's done well, I think history has a kind of magical, transformative power. That power has something to do with the old debate as to whether history is an art or a science. History's a hybrid that can move between both art and science and that's why it lends itself so readily to creative work. As Liz was suggesting this morning, history is where you can have those conversations between drama on the one hand and fact on the other.

I always enjoy pointing out to audiences in English departments especially, that history is the most literary of disciplines. It's the only discipline that's spawned a whole genre, the historical novel, sitting midway between fiction and non-fiction. History is also the only academic discipline that can conceivably always begin anything it has to say with "Once upon a time", that classic line that tells you that you are about to embark on a journey not into

the past so much as into an escapist world of the imagination. And this is, I think, the magical transformative power of history, to transport you imaginatively to another time. It's why children are so intrigued by that notion of "the Olden Days", a notion that children alone possess; why adults can be enthralled by historical novels. History offers an escape; it is or can be escapist (in the best sense). It offers an escape to another world - the past, the olden days, a world of other possibilities—and that other world can be counterpoised to present every day reality, a reality that is often for school children, a constricted and mundane and routinised every day reality.

Now of course history can be taught or presented as part of that routine, most notoriously when history becomes the boring rote learning of dates. More seductively, history becomes part of routine reality when we insist on its *relevance*, when we insist that history is only useful when we can demonstrate its connection with a present reality. In that case—and I think this is where the serious problem lies—history becomes a kind of civic duty, a "moral obligation" as that student put it: history turning you into a good citizen.

What I want to argue is that the escapism of history has a value in its own right. Certainly when you're looking to government for financial support it's useful to stress the good citizenship line. But keep in mind the positive value of escapism; as at least as important as any relevance that history can claim to have. This might seem odd, particularly coming from an Australian historian. After all, claims for Australian history generally rest on the assumption that it is *good for you*, it is relevant. Above all history is going to be improving, it's going to instruct you, it's going to raise you up. What I want to suggest is that insistence on the relevance is precisely why Australian history gets a bad name among children first, and then among the general public, why it is seen as didactic and boring: because we're told it's good for us, we find first year students so resistant to Australian history.

Now by arguing for the virtues of escapism (having just written a history of holidays in Australia, I have been thinking about escaping, and the importance of escapism) I don't think I'm being irresponsible. I'm not by any means suggesting disengagement from the present. I think that what that magical escape to the past does is provide the escapee with alternative models of reality and that's its magical power. History can take you to an

alternative world. It's not simply an escape into a fictional world, a fantasy. It's an escape into an alternative reality, a reality that really did exist. So it opens up the possibility of future transformations as well. It gives us a certain knowledge that how things are is not how things always were or how they need to be. On the other hand an insistence on relevance is likely to imply that things as are now were always meant to be. So even the escapism does have a kind of utility. History might well tell us how we came to be what we are; but it can also tell us what we might become.

So the good historians are the magicians that can take an audience through the wardrobe, to the lions or the witches of Narnia, who can take them into the Tardis and transport them to another time and another reality.

And that brings me to documentary. I think it's easy for me to say we need to find again the magic and the pleasure of history, to actually re-mystify the past, exoticise it, in a sense to un-familiarise ourselves with Australia. And Alex's predisposition to see Australia as exotic rather than familiar could well be an advantage here. I think we need to stop saying, Australian history is good for you. We need to promise ourselves never again to say history tells us who we are.

But I'm not sure how we do it and that's up to you I suppose. I hope and imagine the variety of factual TV program will be presented: the whole variety of archival footage, voiceover narrators, talking heads, reality TV, document-based reconstruction, dramatisation and so on. I do have to admit though that I might not be the typical viewer. But personally I quite like seeing historians clambering around the countryside, not stuck in book-lined studies. Simon Sharma, Kenneth Clarke, Baldrick even, the historical equivalents of David Attenborough. I personally like the authority with which they can speak; in Australia we too often go in for having a celebrity reading a script, and they never have the same authority.

But also (picking up something that Tom said), I think that form of historian-in-landscape responds to that crucial connection with the place. A lot of historians have been working on the notion of a sense of place, of location, of the importance of a place's specificity. And I think that's quite central to the process of re-mystifying things. Particular places, even quite familiar places,

offer the documentary maker some wonderful points of entry into the *unfamiliar* past. For people to be able to see a place they perhaps walk past every day, and then to see it as a possible entry into understanding the alternative realities presented by the past, can be a wonderful thing. Think what you could do with Sydney and Sydney's experience of World War Two, using the buildings that exist in Sydney today. It offers real possibilities of making Sydney a much more magical place. I think Australians have tended to accept the possibility of English history doing that. We can see English history as a fascinating escapist fantasy and in fact we pay to travel to "the past" in England. But it's that mix of familiarity and strangeness that I think documentary filmmaking can establish in Australia today. It's through attention to places where things have happened, where different lives were lived, that I suspect a sense of surprise can be created. There are places we're familiar with, and with the right script, the right stories, we could re-mystify those places and make them unfamiliar again.