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The Nature of School History

What I want to talk about today is the nature of school history as a set of challenges and solutions. I won't be able to cover all the topics that might be included in such a general title so I shall focus on three key overarching issues. These are first, context and character of school history, second, its use and third, the value of school history.

Context and Character

Let's start with an assertion about the context of school history.

Despite some recent trends in curriculum construction and design, history, as both a popular and as a professionally-disciplined form of inquiry, remains an enduring matter of interest in society at large.

This is not an unsupported assertion. We know from the work of researchers Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen in the United States, the work of Peter Seixas and colleagues in Canada and the findings of Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton in Australia that individual, family and social desire to connect with the past constitutes a huge cottage industry that includes such activities as discussion and examination of family photographs and artefacts, the telling and retelling of family stories and genealogical searches for the unknown or less well known stories of ancestors.

Then there is the continuing even growing popularity of museums and other historical sites and theme parks. Again, we know from the work of these US, Canadian and Australian researchers that heritage history and the commemoration of past events play a key role in the lives of many citizens. Indeed, so important are these particular activities, in the US study that listed six ways of connecting with the past, family, museums and heritage sites came first, second and third, respectively.

School history came last.

(The other two activities were reading books and watching movies, in that order).

The Australian survey showed also replicated the US results with family gatherings coming top for connectedness, followed by museum visits, commemorative days, reading books, and watching movies, in that order. Again school history came last, just below watching movies.

The Australian figures for reliability in developing connectedness with the past are interesting. In a group of eleven selected groups/institutions - museums and academic historians came top while media figures and politicians were deemed the most untrustworthy. High school teachers pipped movies for seventh place but were in turn pipped by newspapers for the sixth spot.

These are depressing figures because you would think that the numbers would favour history teachers, the trained professionals. One possible response offered by Ashton and Hamilton to explain this view of academic historians, for example, was that very few respondents might have come into contact with them at university, or elsewhere, and could therefore make a judgment based on status and title rather than on direct experience.

In contrast, all it takes to create a lasting prejudice amongst many school students is one bad teacher of history over a four year (Years 7-10) period, bearing in mind that AEU figures that have remained consistently steady for the past ten years in Victoria at least and they show that between 55-60% of high school teachers regularly teach outside their subject areas. The shortage subjects of mathematics, science and technology suffer badly but the secondary humanities subjects are next down the ladder in terms of opportunistic timetabling. What this means is that random staffing ensues, with Pete the PE teacher, armed with a newly acquired textbook and a half class set for the students, being pushed through the classroom door after being told by the assistant principal and by department head to get in there and teach the Renaissance.

And that is where the school system in the past has fallen down badly, with many curriculum committees, timetablers, assistant principals and principals regarding history as a relatively inconsequential and low level series of stories about dead famous people, contained within a well-intentioned, but vulnerable to exploitation, generic social education program.

And the question needs to be asked at this stage – is history anything other than a compilation of low level stories about dead famous people?

And the answer is, of course, yes since history is a particular and distinct discipline with its own complex skills and understandings. History starts with an inquiry about past events, moves on to an investigation within the context of a particular paradigm created by the inquiry question and ends up with a best possible explanation that a historical researcher or researchers may provide at the time. It is an intricate and challenging area of study that, through varying forms of methodology, leads to open-ended conclusions.

What this means at the school level is that the emphasis needs to be on history as an inquiry-based subject. This does not mean that classroom work needs to be completely inquiry-based

since there will be occasions when history teachers need to introduce a topic and, in mid-topic, history teachers who are good storytellers will, for example, use that skill as a source of inspiration, bearing in mind that the students will need to regard the teacher's account as a secondary source, to be added to the list of other sources to be used. Nor does it mean that, at the start of a two-three week topic, students should be sent off without a structure that should include, for example, some form of teacher guidance, recapitulation, group and individual progress reports and group and classroom discussion.

An outline of the intrinsic aims of school history can be found in the May 2009 national curriculum Shape Paper's two intrinsic aims and these are (in summary):

- Historical understanding is built on an inquiry-based, skills-founded knowledge of chronology, geography, organizational structures, material circumstance and belief systems

As for extrinsic aims, these are stated as:

- Knowledge of the past helps students understand the present and plan for the future
- The critical skills required to understand the past contribute to the an active and informed citizenship role.

However, I should to reinforce and extend some key issues about the extrinsic and the intrinsic nature of the subject and its relationship matters within and beyond the classroom.

The Use of History

Having said that, I'll now come to the use of history - and this implies an examination of both the use and abuse of history.

History is not a discipline that itself preaches or advocates, although it has been used/abused in that fashion on many occasions by historians and others. For example, we have seen, over a period of thirty years or so, the work of Soviet historians who took the theory of the supremacy and infallibility of Marxism-Leninism and used these twin concepts to justify the existence and activities of a Stalinist state. A conclusion therefore may be drawn that history, and especially school history, can, in some instances, be regarded as a propaganda arm of hard-line ideologies, particularly in non-democratic or quasi-democratic states.

Not only that but history as a school study continues to play an instrumental part in developing ideas of national identity in democratic, as well as non-democratic, states. This seems particularly true of the conservative/reactionary side of democratic politics where, in a combined Burkean/Whig approach to the organic growth of the state, history is seen as playing an essential and highly controversial role in appreciating the importance of national progress made under any given political system. So controversial and so widespread is this approach, that a common term 'history wars', first used in the US in the 1990s, is now usually applied to any education system where history and school history are used to make a contested political point. At one end of the democratic political spectrum this would include, for example, the Young Russia movement (or Nashi – regarded as the new *Komsomol*) which, supported by Putin and Medvedev, is currently being used in an attempt to infuse school-age, and other young, Russians with historically-based forms of nationalism (NB in the 2010 May 9th Victory Parade in Red Square, images of Stalin will feature for the first time since 1991).

At the other end of the democratic spectrum, John Howard's recent 2006-7 attempt to introduce what was effectively a self-designed compulsory program in Australian history to all Australian government schools constitutes yet another chapter in the Australian history wars.

We also know that, for example, in other democratic states such as Greece, Italy, the Bosnia, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, Canada and the US similar history wars have been waged over political interference in the classroom, to become the centre of public and political controversy.

Beyond direct political intervention in history, there is also the issue of the use/abuse of history in creating tribal and national mythologies. Going back to the post-Great War period, we have the *Doltschtoss* conspiracy theory, a faux historical narrative that played such an important part in the establishment and rise of the Nazi party. Then there is the myth of the historical link between a supposedly resurgent Fascist Italy and ancient Rome, with even the name of the party and its symbol taken from a Roman magistrate's symbol of power. Later, the myth of benevolent imperial glory confounded by rag-tag (and ungrateful) rebels around the world was a common narrative in British conservative circles in the 1950 and 1960s. Moving on again, we have the more recent US backstabbing myth of battles won and a war lost in Vietnam and even in Australia, thanks to sections of the popular media we have a much milder, if exasperating for Kiwis, myth of a war that Australia apparently fought virtually single-handedly in the Dardanelles. This is the ANZAC myth without the NZ, the British, the Indians and the French colonial troops. And the reverse of the myth that US forces single-handedly won the Pacific War against Japan.

Social Cohesion

But it is not just in preparing our students to deal with a deceptive and a bewildering world of historical representation after they leave school that the value of history education lies. There is a very strong case that history, as a school subject has a powerful role in supporting social cohesion in multicultural democratic societies, nowhere more so than in Australia where, at the federal level, there have been recent attempts to establish a master narrative approach to the past while at the local, community level, differing interpretations of the past have led to fierce debate and even sporadic acts of violence. If multiculturalism is based on mutual respect within the law, there is some evidence that this fragile level of community cohesion is being eroded by amongst other matters, arguments about historical narratives.

This is because, despite recent politically-motivated attempts to prove otherwise, there is no single Australian narrative. This is because, amongst other things, the more positive aspects of European heritage such as the influence of the Enlightenment, social improvements caused by scientific and technological advances as well as the influence of European literary and artistic culture have to be weighed against what many Indigenous Australian regards as the genocidally oppressive nature of European expansion and colonisation.

This negative view of Europe exists side by side with the multiple, often conflicting, narratives brought to Australia by many recent migrant groups. As for the recent migrants, most of the more than 150 ethnic, national and racial groups who claim descent from 250 nationalities that live side by side in their new country have settled peaceably, but 'old country' tensions remain in some communities, none more so than in, for example, than amongst minority elements of Melbourne's Croatian community where a small group of nationalist/fascist sympathisers and activists frequently bring disrepute to the larger migrant Croatian community by, amongst other things, celebrating the achievements of Ante Pavelic, the Croatian fascist leader of World War Two and an acknowledged war criminal whose Ustashe forces were responsible for genocidal activities that even the Gestapo were constrained to describe as 'bestial'. That being the case, any Australian perspective on the history of Europe should, of necessity, be based on a skilled and calmly analytical and dispassionate examination of the evidence and of the historiography.

In this context, the work of Maria Grever of Erasmus University, Rotterdam is relevant. The background to her approach is the research work that she and other colleagues did in assessing the kinds of histories that made sense to students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. In a 2007 study of over 1000 students from 87 different national backgrounds based in 12 schools in the Netherlands, the UK and France, the conclusions were that native-born students had a very high level of interest (88% in NL) in the history of their nation while less than half of foreign-born

students had the same level of interest in national history, many preferring instead the narratives of the original homeland of their families. At the same time, a high proportion of non-native born students from an Islamic background preferred to study the history of religion while the reverse was true of native-born students. However all students showed an interest in world history, with European history eliciting some interest amongst Dutch and French students (but less than world history) and much less interest amongst UK students.

The solution, obviously, is a rigorous examination of national stories as well as an understanding of the contributory narratives of migrant histories in what Maria Grever and Jorn Rusen (German historian and specialist in pedagogy) refer to as 'intercultural communication'. To put it at its simplest, Maria's position is that history education should construct common, as in *shared*, historical experiences in a pluralistic society thus avoiding the risks associated with conflict-inducing tribal histories on the one hand and an imposed national master narrative on the other hand.

Denial and Pseudohistory

The Grever position is but one aspect of the use of history to deal with the propagation of a particular, ideologically-derived points of view, history, and even school history, can also be in a negative fashion used to hide the past, as one scholar, Erna Paris, a Canadian historian discovered and wrote about in her book *Long Shadows: Truth, Lies and History* in which she set out on a personal journey to find out who owned and controlled history in Germany, France, Japan, the United States, South Africa, Bosnia, Rwanda, Chile and Argentina and how the discipline of history can play a part in a journey towards justice. Paris's journey was through the landscape of historical denial.

Where denial is concerned, we know, for example, that in West German schools it was not until the 1980s that the Holocaust was openly discussed in the West German education system. As for East Germany, discussion of Nazi atrocities was wrapped up as a class war activity rather than the singling out of any particular ethnic or religious group. Indeed, it was not until the huge 1979 (in Germany, 1978 in the US) success of the TV miniseries *Holocaust*, starring a young Meryl Streep and a moderately rational Michael Moriarty, that West German society opened itself to public and educational examination of German and German-supported and directed atrocities during the Nazi regime.

In that context, towards the end of Paris's book she mentions the German term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – managing the past (*bewältigen*, the stem of *bewältigung* actually means to overcome) as if it can be somehow be blotted out and she mentions a Slavic proverb,

'Eat bread and salt, and speak the truth', a reference to a theme that dominates her book, the proclivity that politicians and others have for denying the past, to suit their own ideological or personal convictions, and historical denial has certain identifiable and irrational features. Here are some of them.

First, historical denial is about self-deception turned into an attempt to deceive others, a process that follows consistent behavioural patterns. Individual deniers themselves often share psychological traits that include first, a hostility to others that amounts to bigotry or prejudice.

Second, deniers demonstrate an attachment to outrageous beliefs that, in an age of moral and cultural relativism as well as online dissemination, are often allowed to thrive. [The supposedly relativistic nature of modern western intellectualism is an obsession of Terry Eagleton's whose criticism of postmodernism (one of his relativist targets) is that it doesn't actually do anything for good or evil and, by not doing anything, encourages evil].

Third, deniers are caught up in the twin defence mechanisms of repression and projection. They repress uncomfortable thoughts and they project bad motives and actions onto others, which brings us back to their prejudices.

The key thing to point out here that historical deniers exist in a self-contained universe of circular logic and irrationality.

As if that were not bad enough dealing with irrational deniers, we also have to deal with pseudo historians, some of whom are deniers, and some of whom are not.

Popular pseudo history, in my view is an ugly word. However, it is a term that is used to describe a variety of historical and quasi-historical activities.

Pseudo historians are normally individuals or groups on a self-indulgent mission, not on a serious quest. This mission is about seeking to promulgate some personal, political or religious agenda by cherry-picking and distorting the evidence rather than by following the evidence in an effort to arrive at the best possible explanation. This is history back to front.

By popular pseudo history I mean that continuum of historically-based publications and products that might include, at one end Gavin Menzies's curious view that it was the Chinese who gave us the Renaissance and, prior to that, it was they who sailed up the River Thames to present Henry VI with a pair of silk knickers. I would also include, with Menzies's work, a once obscure book, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail's* in which the joint authors (Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln)

suggest that it was the Knights Templar who are behind almost everything. These kinds of publications, based on an idiosyncratic world view, flawed methodology and an audience desire for enticing fable constructed as apparently authenticated fact, take a particular stance which is not supported by the weight of scholarly research but they do sell, thanks to good publicity, an audience fascination with exotic explanations as well as that conspiracy theory dynamic - a desire to be one of those who are *au fait* with the inside story.

Their sales are massive. Menzies's book have sold an estimated 1 million copies and Holy Grail book gave rise to the Dan Brown phenomenon, his worldwide sales are now an estimated 80 million, with knock-on surge in sales for the original masterpiece which had virtually died a commercial death before Dan Brown came along.

However it is not the authors of the written word that I want to focus on today. I actually think that Menzies and Brown are useful irritants to a sometimes self-regarding and pompous profession.

I am much more interested in a different kind of pseudo historian altogether, in this case, the actor, director and writer Mel Gibson.

Gibson is, like Menzies and Brown, a popular culture phenomenon. His films in the US alone have grossed an estimated 6 billion dollars and, since giving up action roles, Gibson has focused more on fringe conspiracy theory drama, religion and the politics of anti-colonialism. As for the latter, two films have been very successful with audiences, one, *Braveheart*, spectacularly so, and the other, *The Patriot*, doing less good business but introducing to global audiences, a very talented young actor Heath Ledger.

Gibson directed and starred in the 1995 *Braveheart* - and it won five academy awards in 1996. He also starred in *The Patriot*, nominated for three Academy awards.

As for Gibson's depiction of the conflict that occurred between the English and the Scots in the fourteenth century, following the release of the film, sales of blue and white face paint amongst Scottish nationalists and their supporters went through the roof and *Braveheart* became a totem for the Scottish nationals, arguably assisting their cause by fomenting anti-Englishness as the basis for Scottish nationalist ideology. A small-scale historiographical industry then arose, with Gibson depicted by English critics as an ill-informed, xenophobic and inaccurate propagandist for an obscure and disastrously incompetent provincial monarch.

Not only was the film regarded as either an ideological inspiration or a travesty, depending on your point of view, but, to cap it all, the writing and directing of the character of William Wallace has

been assessed by a US researcher Kenneth Carr Hawley as messianic, with Wallace portrayed as a poor villager (son of a carpenter), who after an obscure adolescence, commits himself to Scotland (the work of God) and is later betrayed by Robert the Bruce. Finally, Wallace dies on two crossed pieces of wood. The Christian symbolism is obvious and indeed, the writer, Randall Wallace, is a committed Christian. Not that the rest of his films, including *Pearl Harbour* and *We Were Soldiers*, were imbued with cryptic Christianity. The constant throughout though is Gibson, who when interviewed dismisses criticism of his blatantly ideological manipulation of the evidence with the disingenuous, 'It's only a movie'.

With these points in mind, the piece of pseudo historical work that I want to focus on today is the later film *The Patriot*, a story from the American War of Independence. At the heart of the narrative is a conflict between Mel Gibson, playing a wise, family man - Benjamin Martyn - and Jason Isaacs appearing as the ruthless and sadistic William Tavington, an English colonel of dragoons. Martyn is a composite revolutionary character, based mainly on a real-life South Carolinian Francis Marion. Tavington is based on an English loyalist officer Banastre Tarleton.

Again, as with *Braveheart*, the English are portrayed as irredeemably brutal - and the anti-colonialist forces are characterized as uniformly and honourably dedicated to the overthrow of tyranny. In this case though, there is a new wrinkle. German director Roland Emmerich came to *The Patriot* after alien invasion movie *Independence Day* and science fiction movie *Godzilla* has recently directed an apocalyptic science fiction blockbuster *2012*.

In *The Patriot*, a different kind of movie altogether, he included a scene that contained an alarmingly contentious historical reference.

This is the section of the film where the innocent American citizens of the local community are locked in their own church during a service and, at the orders of Tarleton, burned to death. The reference without doubt is to the destruction of the village of Oradour-sur-Glane in June 1944 when the *Das Reich* SS division, on their way through to meet the Allied troops in Normandy were continually harassed by Maquis sniper fire - with one of their popular officers being killed close to Oradour. The consequence was that the men women and children of the town were all murdered by the SS with the men shot in local garages and outhouse and the women and children burned alive in the church. The town remains just as it was left after the atrocity as a commemoration of its citizens and as a memorial to a horrific Nazi crime.

As it happens, no such event took place in the American War of Independence. There were atrocities on both sides and Marion himself has been accused of such acts by US historians but these actions were generally to do with the killing of prisoners.

The point to make here is that in the film attempts to represent the British colonial presence in the colonies as being close to that of the Nazi occupation of France, a completely spurious comparison, but one in line with Gibson's version of anti-colonialism.

The further point to make is this. While very few school students will have read Gavin Menzies from cover to cover, many of them will have seen the Mel Gibson historical movies. Not only that but it is important to point out that film imagery has a very profound impact on individual and group consciousness.

How do we know that? Because the evidence is out there.

Back in 1988, Peter Seixas, the pre-eminent Canadian history education guru, decided to set his pre-service university students the task of assessing the level of general historical knowledge of Year 10 Vancouver students in local high schools when they were on their school experience placements – an exercise in finding out prior knowledge. The results were unsurprising: most of the students tested had very low levels of historical knowledge and this tied in with the kinds of annual surveys conducted by the conservative think tank the Dominion Institute, to be quickly picked up by conservative newspapers. The basic conclusion was that students in high school don't know much history – a phenomenon that is well known to history teachers in Australia. We call this the Edmund Barton Syndrome.

Anyway, back to Peter and his Vancouver high school. A year later his university students tested the historical knowledge of similar groups of high school students – and the results were astonishing. In the intervening period, the new group of students had somehow gained enough historical knowledge to massively outperform the previous year's class. Not only that but they knew quite a bit about historical characters who were not even in the curriculum. Perplexed by the difference, Peter looked for an explanation. It couldn't be the curriculum because it was exactly the same. It couldn't be the ability level of the sample because that was much the same - and, as for the teaching style – the same conclusion was to be drawn – not enough change there to warrant this impressive transformation.

Eventually, Peter worked out the answer to this mysterious advance in student knowledge. In the intervening period between the two surveys, a Hollywood movie had been released, and many of you will remember it – the movie was called *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* - about two apparently dumb teenagers who, thanks to the advantages of time travel, encounter major historical characters ranging, in chronology, from Socrates (memorably - 'So-crates dude') to Sigmund Freud.

Tie that episode in with a more recent story. Two years ago, Annabel Astbury, executive officer of the HTAV, conducted a straw poll of the most popular history topics at Year 10. Surprisingly, since it is not mentioned anywhere in the standards, one of the most popular topics was – the Boer War.

It is clear from this report by Annabel that a dramatised representation of Australian troops at war in the film *Breaker Morant* was doing more to direct enacted curriculum than the statement of standards published on the VCAA website.

Add to the mix of information about movies and the development of historical consciousness the survey results of the project *Australians and the Past* (Ashton and Hamilton, 2003) that showed the most popular ways that Australians found out about the past was through film (both feature and documentary) and through photographs.

[Depressingly for history teachers, as sources of historical reliability, they came a lowly 14th, well below museum officials and academic historians, amongst others.]

Ashton and Hamilton project's methodology was based on a similar but much larger US project, the presence of the past the results of which demonstrated that across the age groups (19-65+) film scored very highly in subject's development of connectedness to the past, higher than school history in all age categories - except for 65+ respondents. Indeed, 81% of their 808 subjects had watched history movies or documentaries in the 12 months prior to the survey. At the same time, and this is important, connectedness to the past through family stories, museum visits, commemorative holidays and reading books all scored above movies and school classes as sources of connectedness.

It might be interesting at this stage to pause and refer back to the 1982 work of US cognitive psychologists William Swann and Lynn Miller, demonstrating that undergraduates were capable of forming vivid visual images of an interviewee talking about her life story, formed more accurate memories of their narratives than did non-vivid imagery subjects who viewed the same set of images.

Furthermore, research by Alan Marcus (2003) shows that when students view historically-based movies outside the classroom, although they regard them as a source of valuable insights into the past, they treat them with some scepticism as to their reliability – whereas, when it came to movies shown in the classroom, unless students were offered varying filmic accounts of similar historical episodes, students viewed the teacher-selected movies far less sceptically. In other words, the solitary, unexamined film became just another textbook but with more vivid images.

And this is why the struggle against socially and politically important historical misrepresentation and disguised ideology is so important at the classroom level that we prepare our students for a life after school with its unrestrained, chaotic and often intense bombardment of irrationally-derived images and representations. It is the work of the history educator, in a relatively ordered, purposeful and rational environment to attempt to anchor a student's response in the kinds of skills and understandings that are outlined in the national curriculum and that will provide them with a toolkit to interpret the past and rate that past to the present and to the future.

Tony Taylor 2010