

HUMBLED BY HISTORY

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In his superb assessment of our best-known historians, Tom Griffiths has produced a manifesto for a new understanding of Australia, writes Nicolas Rothwell

***The Art of Time Travel: Historians and Their Craft By Tom Griffiths
Black Inc, 376pp, \$34.99***

For all the multiplicity of his interests and the many fine gradations in his thinking, environmental historian Tom Griffiths is a man possessed by a single idea: the dream of a specific Australian kind of history, a new way of seeing the continent. This dream has substance, for in recent years a revolution in historical thought in this country has been under way: the discovery of the Aboriginal past.

Griffiths has made this revolution and its consequences his special subject: it serves as the red thread running through his new assessment of Australian historians, the touchstone, the index that clarifies the evolution of their theories and ideas. Indeed it shapes his account of the lives and aspirations of his predecessors and close contemporaries into something much more than a mere sequence of character sketches and intellectual excavations. *The Art of Time Travel* is in fact a manifesto for a new understanding of Australia, a new sense of country.

In painstaking, subtle fashion, crystallising without simplifying, Griffiths tracks the advances made across the past half-century by a range of remarkable thinkers and researchers in the fields of history, ecology and archeology - a band of brothers and sisters joined together by a shared goal. Their names are well known to inquiring readers, for many of them are public intellectuals as much as specialists in their scholarly domains. They have changed our picture of the vanished world of past time that underlies the present day. Their writings and investigations build into a grand endeavour. John Mulvaney, the father of the deep past; Henry Reynolds, the exponent of Mabo; Geoffrey Blainey, the master of broad horizon history; Inga Clendinnen, the early colony's most passionate chronicler: these are all figures who have played their part in the development of a new Australian historical consciousness.

Now, in Griffiths, they have their own fitting historian. He offers up not just a guide to the ideas of his 14 "travellers" in historical time but a brief account of their backgrounds and biographies, the flavours of their personalities and the influences that give distinctive texture to their work. Thus Blainey greatly admired the French historian of Mediterranean cultures Fernand Braudel; Jesuit-trained Greg Denning, who taught Griffiths at the University of Melbourne, was "another historian forged at John Mulvaney's campfire" and worked as a field assistant on the famous

archeological dig at Fromm's Landing on the Murray River. Reynolds is intriguingly sketched as a keen student, in his youthful years, of radical nationalist literature, deeply under the influence of the great scholar of the bush tradition, Russel Ward. The chronicler of early Sydney life Grace Karskens bears the stamp of English historian EP Thompson's writings; Graeme Davison, author of *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne*, was attracted by French structuralists and their examination of class in urban societies.

Just as telling are the personal motivations Griffiths uncovers in the fields of study of his chosen subjects. Keith Hancock's majestic environmental narrative *Discovering Monaro* is seen as the historian's way of deepening his uneasy attachment to Canberra, and an exploration of "anguished love for his country". Sometimes a seemingly simple comparison serves to capture the essence of a writer's mode of thought: Blainey is a magpie, he "prods the earth inquisitively, feeds quirkily, collects sustenance in a proudly idiosyncratic way; he scavenges bright details and oddments that catch his eye. His voice is rich, his song mellifluous! He flies above the terrain and perceives broad patterns below. And as the bird books warn us, he doesn't concede ground and can launch surprising attacks, especially in defence of his nest".

Many of the time travellers are academics, and defined by the freedoms and the limits of the university: its commitment to instruction, its sense of the fruitful connections between disciplines, its conviction that the structure of the world will yield to rational inquiry. Some, though, are not: Griffiths casts his net wide enough to include mid-century novelist Eleanor Dark, ecological historian of the Pilliga Scrub Eric Rolls and poet activist Judith Wright. But in their various ways, all his characters wish to expand the conventional conception of Australia. They want to see the nation as something more than a legacy foundation of received and established ideas, the remains of a colony.

There is, then, a grand, collaborative project in view. Griffiths is plain about his central thesis: something extraordinary happened in Australian art and letters in the postwar decades of deepened research and heightened historical understanding. Mulvaney's discovery of the deep Aboriginal past was critical.

"Australia," writes Griffiths, "has a settler history of resistance to the intimations of Aboriginal antiquity and adaptability. From the beginnings of colonisation, there was reluctance amongst colonists to acknowledge the depth of belonging of a people whose continent they had usurped. Aborigines, it was commonly thought, had no history. They were caught in the fatal thrall of nature's continental museum." Mulvaney's series of excavations gradually uncovered a long continuity of indigenous presence: more than 5000 years at his first dig on the lower Murray, 16,000 years at Kenniff Cave on Mount Moffatt in central Queensland, 32,000 at Lake Mungo in the far southwest of NSW. Australia was old, not new, and this was its heritage. Mulvaney himself came to regard the reassertion of Aboriginal cultural identity as "one of the most significant events in Australian intellectual history". Denning, late in life, was overwhelmed by the sense of vastness and infinity of time he experienced at Lake Mungo, and was moved to write that "Aboriginal history is the history of us all".

Even as the expanses of the far past were emerging into view, the colonial period was being placed under the microscope. New studies in the Kimberley, the Victoria River

district, the Gulf country and Queensland were uncovering the savage nature of the frontier.

Australian historians found themselves poring through the records and journals of the past to detect traces of what the early settlers and administrators had hidden, rather than the overt narratives the archives revealed. The challenge to this newly minted orthodoxy mounted 15 years ago by independent researcher Keith Windschuttle became known as the "history wars" and triggered an intensive program of further research.

"We now have a clearer understanding of the ubiquity, variety and trauma of frontier violence in Australian history," Griffiths concludes. We also have a deeper sense of the complexity of the frontier, where collaboration and co-option were commonplace, as was a degree of guarded co-operation, where guerilla warfare raged between two well-matched sides, where the Aboriginal-manned native police were the key agents of destruction in much of the far north and religious missionaries did more than governmental administrators or protectors to preserve remote indigenous lives.

There is a richness to the picture now and it deepens almost by the year: James Boyce's new account of Van Diemen's Land shows how the Tasmanian bush "Aboriginalised" the early settlers; the Roper track emerges as a battlefield in the writings of Tony Roberts; the archival research of Karskens in Sydney is uncovering the story of the first urban Aboriginal lives. This school of history writing traces the impact of the Western incomers on Aboriginal societies and examines the survival of indigenous traditions across the face of settled Australia, but it has equally fertile material to hand when it turns to the impact of Aboriginal Australians on the mainstream - in the transformation of the Australian vernacular, in modes of bush behaviour, in borrowed adaptations to the landscape.

Preoccupations of this kind have naturally estranged Australian history from the Western standard model. When one seeks to probe the frontier from both sides or gauge the unacknowledged past's continuing gravity in the present day, one has drifted far from the dogmatic pattern of top-down history-writing first established by Thucydides and Tacitus, and long perpetuated in the canon, and still popular in the synoptic historical narratives of our day.

This sense of an old order of history passing and giving way to a newly configured discipline is common enough in the modern academy: the king of Australian historians, Stuart Macintyre, expressed it in poignant fashion when he recalled his early training in the Melbourne University school of history, where the subject was still seen as a moral drama of necessity and freedom, the central element in a truly liberal education: "How irretrievably lost is that humanist vision." Something messier and more complicated has taken its place, in part because of the widened scope of contemporary history-writing, in part because of Australia's sense of need to know and face its past. In part, too, because of the self-reflexive quality of modern thought.

Every historian is also a subject, plunged in history - and so it is with Griffiths himself, brought up on "the suburban frontier" in the 1960s in the middle-class Melbourne suburb of Balwyn. His meteorologist father built a family home that was

at once work of art and intellectual statement, "with its open plan, tall windows, exposed pine and slate flooring, angled walls, skillion roof, broad eaves and exposed rafters". There was a nature strip, apricots and blood plums grew on the backyard fruit trees, the library was a bus that came and parked nearby, there were daily deliveries of milk and bread by horse and cart. These were the building-bricks of his early years, and they are gone, along with the men and women who lived then and their thoughts and actions. Great currents take them: the faultlines of history shift, hopes and plans rise up and fall, the strong forces of the age come to predominate.

Only the passing of time - across generations - enables us to see how. Fate and fortune are not the same as luck. They allow us some agency in the vortex of history, even if it is not always conscious. They provide the basis for moral storytelling, itself a way of finding agency in a seemingly chaotic world. There are consequences to individual action that can play out across centuries, and social responsibilities and physical legacies that echo down the years. We begin to understand that the ancestral past lurks within us.

A rich framework. How, though, to write about such elusive themes, and capture them? Is narrative history the royal road? Like many literary-minded historians, Griffiths agonises over the relationship between history and historical fiction, as if there was a true contest between the two forms of writing. He writes his own works by precise, artisanal method.

I find that one must first amass the clay, the raw material of reality, building up the rough form, gathering much more than one can eventually keep. Then begins the careful paring away, the sculpting and moulding, the tweaking out of detail. The final reality emerges, and one could believe that it was always there, trapped in the clay, awaiting discovery and release.

What is the difference between this technique, with its interplay between imagining and evidence-collecting, and the craft of literary fiction set in the landscape of the past, asks Griffiths - but the question is ill-framed. The historical novel is inevitably allied to kitsch, to costume drama. It is a form that pretends to stand in the past, to know what can never be known, while history begins on the near side of the divide between us and the past, and works tentatively, advancing backwards, seeking to recover what it may from oblivion.

A much graver problem of method overhangs modern Australian history's new lean towards Aboriginal subject matter, and it is one that historians, naturally unpractised at reading the upshot of their best intentions, rarely identify. We might call it annexationism. Vast, sophisticated books describing the frontier and Aboriginal experiences in the colonial and the contemporary era pour from the presses. They bring whole submerged realms of tale and experience to light, they record for posterity, they correct legends and dethrone stereotypes - all this, yet the writing of such histories serves to transfer knowledge, take heritage. The most pro-Aboriginal works of history written by outside hands have their place in a process of cultural dispersion, even as they preserve.

This is the burden of the Australian historian, and the Australian past, and it still haunts the story Griffiths tells: the story of a transformation that has turned Aboriginal people from a "melancholy anthropological footnote" into central actors

on a bright-lit stage. One can read it, of course, as progress, as a broadening of attention:

Australian history became as much about ecological, social and technological discontinuities as about the political stability and continuity for which the European settlers first celebrated it. British colonisation was seen as both an invasion and an awesome social experiment; there was dancing with strangers and there was war. Historians ventured to the other side of the frontier and peered back at "the white men's eyes", and Aboriginal people were compelled - and some chose - to cross the beach in the other direction.

An edifying story: enlightenment dawns, the repressed and effaced returns to the surface. But the quest narrative of the historical inquirer never ends, there is never a definitive account, a true story, only complex, rough draft approximations. Here is Griffiths, signing off, weaving his spell:

As we study the past it changes before our eyes, affected by our gaze and eluding definitive capture, like the electrons that orbit a nucleus. No matter how practised we are at history, it always humbles us. No matter how often we visit the past, it always surprises us. The art of time travel is to maintain critical poise and grace in this dizzy space. There is a further hazard: we never return to exactly the same present from which we left, for time cycles on remorselessly even when we seek to defy it. And in the course of our quest we find that we, too, have changed. Nicolas Rothwell is a senior writer at The Australian.