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Does Australian History Have a Future?

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This article first considers the problems of isolation that can beset national histories like Australian history, and then discusses the moves in recent years towards more transnational forms of history. In particular, developments in comparative histories, transnational histories, diasporic histories, and world histories raise questions about the contribution of Australian historians to future historical scholarship.

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY has a low profile in international historical scholarship.¹ There are few professional historians elsewhere who know much about Australian history, and, as most writers of Australian history know, few international readers for works specifically focused on Australian material. In this article I consider how and why this is so, whether professional Australian historians should be concerned about it, and what if anything they should do. I also consider some recent scholarly developments that suggest that perhaps Australian history as a distinct entity may change significantly, influenced by an international drift away from national and towards more transnational forms of history.

The reasons for the modest international audience for Australian history are many. Australia is a small power in world terms, still outside the mainstream of international politics and debate, and there is no strong reason to expect our history to be of great interest elsewhere. Yet size isn't everything, especially in historical scholarship, and some have suggested that the fault lies not with our circumstances but with ourselves. We have, they say, looked inward, become insular, and thereby failed to address the rest of the world; it is not surprising that others respond to our self-absorption by ignoring us. Critics have come from both home and abroad: Donald Denoon has chided Australian historians for their narrowness of focus, their lack of interest in the larger transnational picture, while in England A.G. Hopkins has pointed out that the isolation of Australian national history is mirrored by a similar isolation of all the post-colonial histories, in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.²

It was not always so. Australian history, when conceptualised as a part of British imperial or Commonwealth history, had a broader world of historical reference, as explored by Stuart Macintyre.³ In both Britain and Australia,

¹ I wish to thank the following people for their assistance with this article: Desley Deacon, Tim Rowse, Tom Griffiths, and Fiona Paisley. The history of Australian history is canvassed at greater length in Ann Curthoys, 'Cultural History and the Nation', in *Australian Cultural History*, eds Hsu-Ming Teo and Richard White, forthcoming.

² Donald Denoon, 'Open and Closed Histories', *Australian Historical Studies* 24, no. 95 (October 1990): 175-88; A.G. Hopkins, 'Back to the Future: From National History to Imperial History', *Past and Present* 164 (1999): 198-243.

³ Stuart Macintyre, 'Imperial History' in *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, eds Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998), 339-40.

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Australian history was until the 1950s and 1960s generally conceptualised as part of British or British imperial history. British historians wrote histories of Empire imbued with a teleology of constitutional progress, showing British countries moving from colonies to nations.⁴ In Australia, historians of the interwar period like Keith Hancock and Ernest Scott also stressed Australia's relations to Britain and its place in the Empire, and shared the British historians' teleological framework. After World War II, John M. Ward, A.G.L. Shaw, Douglas Pike, and others continued to emphasise Australia's British connection, now as a member of the Commonwealth.⁵

Nor was the British Empire the only broader context for Australian history. There was also an interest in comparing Australian to American history, often inspired by Frederick Jackson Turner's 'frontier thesis', first enunciated in 1893, which interpreted American history as a consequence of the experience of the frontier, where frontiersmen became Americans in their engagement with, and conquering of, the wilderness and Native Americans.⁶ During the 1950s a number of authors, both American and Australian, set out to consider the applications of the Turner thesis to Australia, and to compare the Australian and American frontiers.⁷ Then, in 1964, Louis Hartz proposed his 'fragmentation thesis', which interpreted each of the former British colonies, later independent nations, as spin-offs from Europe, marked by and indeed frozen within its moment of formation. In Australia's case, this moment was interpreted as a radical egalitarianism, derived from the Europe of the late eighteenth century. Australian historians pondered the thesis for a little, but let it go.⁸ In a similar

⁴ Stuart Ward, 'Transcending the Nation: A Global Imperial History?' in Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Critical Approaches to National Histories and Literatures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002, forthcoming).

⁵ John M. Ward, *British Policy in the South Pacific, 1786–1893: A Study in British Policy Towards the South Pacific Islands Prior to the Establishment of Governments by the Great Powers* (Sydney: Australasian Publishing Co., 1948); John M. Ward, *Earl Grey and the Australian Colonies, 1846–1857: A Study of Self-government and Self-interest* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1958); A.G.L. Shaw, *Convicts and the Colonies: A Study of Penal Transportation from Great Britain and Ireland to Australia and Other Parts of the British Empire* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1977); A.G.L. Shaw, *The Story of Australia* (London: Faber, 1955); Douglas Pike, *The Quiet Continent* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' in *The Turner Thesis Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History* ed. George Rogers Taylor, (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Co, 1956).

⁷ Fred Alexander, *Moving Frontiers: An American Theme and its Application to Australian History* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1947); Arthur Grenfell Price, *White Settlers and Native Peoples: An Historical Study of Racial Contacts Between English-Speaking Whites and Aboriginal Peoples in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1949); Paul F. Sharp, 'Three Frontiers: Some Comparative Studies of Canadian, American, and Australian Settlement', *Pacific Historical Review* 24, 1955; A.L. Burt, 'If Turner Had Looked at Canada, Australia, and New Zealand When He Wrote About the West', in *The Frontier in Perspective*, eds W.D. Wyman and C.B. Kroeber, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957); H.C. Allen, *Bush and Backwoods: A Comparison of the Frontier in Australia and the United States* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1959); *The Frontier: Comparative Studies*, eds David Harry Miller and Jerome O. Steffen, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977).

⁸ Louis Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada, and Australia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964).

spirit, there was comparative work undertaken in the 1960s at the Commonwealth Studies Centre at Duke University, on a range of economic and political historical topics, by people such as Craufurd Goodwin and Gerald Caiden, but this work too dropped away.⁹

The imperial and comparative frameworks for Australian history gradually fell out of favour as Australian historiography began to develop a national non-imperial identity, indeed a nationalist identity. The 1950s and 1960s were the era of new gains in national independence, in political terms for the former colonies of Asia and Africa, and in cultural terms for the former Dominions. In the world of historiography the response to decolonisation was, as Hopkins has noted, the separate development in each post-colonial nation of a professional, academic, national history. Overseas histories were still used to help illuminate Australian experience, as in Charles Rowley's *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*,¹⁰ but direct comparative or holistic studies were rarely attempted. Australian history became more national, critical, autonomous, and isolated.

What does it matter, you may ask, if Australian history largely matters only to Australians? I think it matters a lot, not only for the quality of future scholarship but also because we have, potentially, interesting things to contribute to world-wide historical debate. The forthcoming World Congress of Historical Sciences in Sydney in 2005 will provide a testing ground for those working in Australian history, and there is quite a bit of work to do if we are to meet that challenge successfully. Furthermore, national history generally is under question within the discipline internationally. Influenced by talk of globalisation and the need for more holistic world and transnational histories, there are strong signs within the discipline of a turning away from the nation as the basic organising category for historical scholarship. Recently historians have been increasingly acknowledging the general tendencies towards narrowness and nationalism that have haunted their discipline, and are urging their colleagues to pay far more attention than we have previously to all those processes, events, and themes that are best understood beyond the nation and which cross national boundaries.¹¹

For intellectual and perhaps broader social reasons, then, it seems that the study of Australian history in the near future will be less a single focused entity than it has been, and more a form of scholarship that is diffused through various kinds of transnational histories. In this brief essay, I want to investigate some of the very recent developments that are affecting, and are likely to continue to affect, historical scholarship on Australia in the near future. These include a turn to comparative, diasporic, world, international, and thematic transnational histories.

⁹ Craufurd Goodwin, *British Economists and Australian Gold* (Durham NC: Center for Commonwealth Studies, Duke University, 1970); Gerald Caiden, *Administrative Reform* (London: Penguin, 1970).

¹⁰ Charles Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1970).

¹¹ A.G. Hopkins, ed., *Globalization in World History* (London: Pimlico, 2002).

Comparative histories

I'll begin with *comparative* history, work that compares the historical experience of one or more nations, or perhaps parts of nations, such as regions, states, provinces, or cities. Even during the decades of relatively little interest in comparative work, there were some important exceptions: Andrew Markus compared the reception of Chinese immigrants in California and Eastern Australia, while Donald Denoon's groundbreaking work, *Settler Capitalism* compared Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, and South Africa, especially in terms of their economies and political structures. A decade and a half later David Goodman compared the gold rush experience in Victoria and California.¹²

There are signs of a revival of interest in comparative work in very recent years, mostly undertaken by Australians who have worked in American history; it is still the case that only rarely have US historians shown interest in Australian history. This interest has been evident in the main themes of Australian historiography—including gender, race, and environment. Over a decade ago, Desley Deacon compared the historical operations of gender and the state in the two societies in her major article, 'Politicising Gender'.¹³ Australian historians with knowledge of US history have returned to comparative studies of frontier societies, this time without the Turnerian framework, and focused more closely on a cross-cultural study of Indigenous–non-Indigenous relations.¹⁴ Patrick Wolfe has explored racial thinking in Australia, the United States, and elsewhere, while Anne Keary has compared the relations between indigenous peoples in Eastern Australia and north-western America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹⁵ Feminist historians have been increasingly interested in American–Australian comparisons, with Katherine Ellinghaus and Ann McGrath both investigating interracial marriage in Australia and North America.¹⁶ Deborah Bird Rose and I have both discussed the similarities and differences between American and Australian settler narratives of belonging in terms of

¹² Andrew Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California 1850–1901*, (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1979); Donald Denoon, *Settler Capitalism: The Dynamics of Dependent Development in the Southern Hemisphere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); David Goodman, *Gold Seeking: Victoria and California in the 1850s* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994).

¹³ Desley Deacon, 'Politicizing Gender', *Genders* 6 (Fall, 198): 1–19. See also Carol Bacchi and Alison Mackinnon, 'Re-politicizing Gender: A Response to Desley Deacon' *Genders* 11, 1991.

¹⁴ The critiques of Turner's thesis in American historiography are many. See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978) for a rival interpretation, stressing Puritan consciousness of Native American land as truly belonging to white settler Americans as God's chosen people.

¹⁵ Patrick Wolfe, 'Land, Labor, and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race', *American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (June 2001): 866–905; Anne Keary, 'Translating Colonialism: Missionaries and Indigenous Peoples in Eastern Australia and Northwestern America', paper delivered to American Historical Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, 3–6 January 2002.

¹⁶ Katherine Ellinghaus, 'Margins of Acceptability: Class, Education and Interracial Marriage in Australia and America', *Frontier* 23, 2002; Ann McGrath, *Entangled Frontiers: Marriage and Sex Across Colonizing Frontiers in Australia and North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

foundational biblical stories such as Genesis and Exodus.¹⁷ Ian Tyrrell has more recently completed a major study comparing environmental reform movements in Australia and California.¹⁸

Comparisons are also being explored by historians from other former British settler colonies—South Africa, Canada, and New Zealand. Several historians of South African history have begun to consider other settler societies, including Australia, notably Alan Lester with his study of racial discourse in New South Wales, New Zealand, and the Cape Colony,¹⁹ and Kirsten McKenzie with her detailed study of scandal in Sydney and Cape Town.²⁰ Interest in Canada–Australia comparisons has been much stronger in literary criticism than in history, but some Canadian and Australian historians have been interested in comparisons. An ambitious special issue of *Labour History* was based on a Canadian–Australian comparison, drawn from a conference in which Canadian and Australian scholars embarked on the task of looking for the similarities and differences in their histories.²¹ Interestingly, there have been relatively few histories comparing Australia and New Zealand; again it is Denoon who, with various collaborators, has especially sought to place Australia more firmly within a larger Pacific region.²² Diane Kirkby and Catherine Coleborne have edited a major collection, *Law, History, Colonialism: The Reach of Empire*, which traces the legal aspects of imperial and colonial history.²³

Comparative history, however, is notoriously difficult, so large is the sheer quantity of scholarship that it normally requires, and so hard is it to translate the conceptual framework developed by and for one national history into that of another. As a result, a more common approach has been the development of multi-authored international collections of essays on a common theme, with historians contributing case studies from their respective national histories. Australian historians, I have the impression, are increasingly contributing to and

¹⁷ Deborah Bird Rose, 'Rupture and the Ethics of Care in Colonized Space', in *Prehistory to Politics: John Mulvaney, the Humanities and the Public Intellectual*, eds Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 190–215; Ann Curthoys, 'Mythologies', in *The Australian Legend and its Discontents*, ed. Richard Nile (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Ian Tyrrell, *True Gardens of the Gods: Californian–Australian Environmental Reform, 1860–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

¹⁹ Alan Lester, 'Colonial Settlers and the Metropole: Racial Discourse in the Early Nineteenth Century Cape Colony, Australia and New Zealand', *Landscape Research* 27:1 (2002): 39–49.

²⁰ Kirsten McKenzie, *Scandal in the Colonies: Sydney and Cape Town, 1800–1850*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, forthcoming); see also Kirsten McKenzie, 'Of Convicts and Capitalists: Honour and Colonial Commerce in 1830s Cape Town and Sydney', in this volume.

²¹ *Labour/Le Travail* 38 (Fall, 1996); *Labour History* 71, November 1996.

²² Donald Denoon, Philippa Mein-Smith and Marivic Wyndham, *A History of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); Donald Denoon with Marivic Wyndham, 'Australia and the Western Pacific' in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, eds Roger Louis and Alaine Low (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²³ Diane Kirkby and Catherine Coleborne, eds, *Law, History, Colonialism: The Reach of Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001). See especially Patricia Grimshaw, Robert Reynolds and Shurlee Swain, 'The Paradox of "Ultra Democratic" Governments: Indigenous Peoples' Civil Rights in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand, Canada and Australia'.

sometimes editing thematic international collections, on a whole range of topics from war and commemoration, to nation, race and empire, and colonial frontiers. This is an important step outward, one that facilitates historians' engagement with each other's work across national boundaries, and that suggests the possibility of new kinds of history to come. This development has been particularly evident in gender and Indigenous histories, but also in other fields as well.²⁴

Typically, though, in most of these collections the individual contributions remain within the boundaries of national history. The case studies remain just that, case studies; they can be read entirely independently of one another, and are usually not reworked into a truly transnational history. As Fiona Paisley, herself one of the frequently published Australian contributors to such collections, has noted, the comparison is usually confined to the editorial comment.²⁵ And there are other difficulties with such collections. Who actually reads them, and *how* are they read? Those published overseas are expensive and largely inaccessible. In publishing in such collections, Australian historians risk losing their local audience, who may be unaware of the publication and often not especially interested in the non-Australian case studies. Furthermore, while comparative history may help illuminate national historical issues and problems, it ultimately rests on and confirms—rather than displaces—the nation as the foundational category of analysis.

Transnational histories

While the reality is a growing trend towards international collections which juxtapose national case studies on a particular theme, many historians' aspiration is towards more truly *transnational* histories. Transnational histories are less concerned with comparison, and more with tracing patterns of influence and

²⁴ See, for just some examples, Ulla Wiklander, Alice Kessler-Harris and Jane Lewis, eds, *Protecting Women: Labor Legislation in Europe, the United States, and Australia, 1880–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Marilyn Lake, 'Female Desire: The Meaning of World War Two', reprinted in *Feminism and History*, ed. Joan Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Marilyn Lake, 'The Inviolable Woman: Feminist Theories of Citizenship, Australia 1900–1945' in *Feminism, the Public and the Private*, ed. Joan Landes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and 'Australian Frontier: Feminism and the Marauding White Man' in *Gender and Imperialism*, ed. Clare Midgley (Manchester University Press, 1998). See also chapters by Stephen Garton and Ann Curthoys in T.G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper, eds, *The Politics of War Memory and Commemorations* (London: Routledge, 2000); Fiona Paisley, '"Unnecessary Crimes and Tragedies": Race, Gender and Sexuality in Australian Policies of Aboriginal Child Removal', in *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernity*, ed. Antoinette Burton (New York: Routledge, 1999), 134–47. For international collections with Australian editors, see Alison Bashford and Claire Hooker, eds, *Contagion: Historical and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2001); Lynette Russell, ed., *Colonial Frontiers: Indigenous–European Encounters in Settler Societies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001); Patricia Grimshaw, Katie Holmes, and Marilyn Lake, eds, *Women's Rights and Human Rights: International Historical Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); John Eddy and Deryck Schreuder, *The Rise of Colonial Nationalism: Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa First Assert Their Nationalities, 1880–1914* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988).

²⁵ Fiona Paisley, 'Introduction', *Australian Feminist Studies* 16, no. 36 (November, 2000): 271.

networks of connection across national boundaries, perhaps ignoring the nation altogether. They include histories of empires and colonialism, diasporic histories, world histories, and histories of international movements (religious, political, social and cultural). Historians in Australia are in different ways gradually taking notice of these international disciplinary developments.

The new imperial social history is refiguring British and indeed other imperial history in several ways. The teleological slant has been abandoned, and there is more interest in the effects of 'margins' on centres, and the circulation of ideas and people within the empire as a whole. Britain is no longer seen as a stable centre which influences its colonies but rather as itself being constituted by the imperial and colonising processes it initiated but no longer fully controls. The new imperial history is also being refigured by increased attention to both gender and race, and their interrelationship.²⁶ Historians of European interest in the Pacific have been particularly interested in not only the ways Europeans interpreted and understood unfamiliar peoples and environments, but also in the ways their interaction with the Pacific impacted on European culture and ideas itself.²⁷

Historians are exploring ways to reinsert Australia into this revised imperial context so that Australian historical experience becomes part of the study of relationships, networks, and connections, traced back and forth and indeed around the Empire as a whole. This approach is reinvigorating aspects of 'Australian' historiography. The history of the convict period has, perhaps, always been the most open to an imperial approach.²⁸ More recently, convict history is being enlivened by the cooperation between historians located at opposite ends of the globe, especially Hobart and Edinburgh, and the United Kingdom and Australia more generally. Their work is also enlivened by another kind of collaboration, between historians and literary critics, who together endeavour to make sense of the fragments of convict testimony left to us from Australia's seventy years of experience, in one part of the continent or another, of transportation and convict labour. Ian Duffield and James Bradley have edited a collection, *Representing Convicts*²⁹ and more recently Lucy Frost and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart have edited *Chain Letters: Narrating Convict Lives*,³⁰ which places the quest for convict voices

²⁶ Ruth Roach Pierson and Nupur Chaudhuri, eds, *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998); Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Antoinette Burton, ed., *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities* (London: Routledge, 1999); Catherine Hall, ed., *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Routledge, 2000); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

²⁷ Tony Ballantyne, 'Empire, Knowledge and Culture: From Proto-Globalization to Modern Globalization', in *Globalization in World History*, ed. A.G. Hopkins (London: Pimlico, 2002), 115-40.

²⁸ See Alan Frost, *Convicts and Empire: A Naval Question* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980).

²⁹ Ian Duffield and James Bradley, *Representing Convicts: New Perspectives on Convict Forced Labour Migration* (New York: Leicester University Press, 1997).

³⁰ Lucy Frost and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, *Chain Letters: Narrating Convict Lives* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001).

and perspectives within the larger frameworks of transnational, multicultural, imperial, and world history.

From these narratives and micro-narratives we gain glimpses of large-scale systems of governance, surveillance, and power as they were created within the British worldwide spheres of influence and control. No detail is too minute, and no process too large, for these stories. Though focused on people transported to the Australian colonies, the essays in this collection are exercises in transnational history in the sense that they take us to England, Ireland, New York, Canada, Madrid, Jamaica, Sierra Leone, the Bay of Honduras, Demerara, as well as New South Wales and Van Dieman's Land. Through these micro narratives, we follow the workings of the British imperial system, and the ways in which conflicts and problems in one part impacted upon others. So, for example, a slave revolt in Jamaica in 1831–32 saw the imprisonment of Alexander Simpson and his transportation to Van Dieman's Land in 1833, while an uprising in Canada in 1840 led to the transportation of the American 'Patriot exiles'. Linus Miller, a convict from New York State, was transported along with ninety-one others for his role in an armed incursion into the colony of Upper Canada, and subsequently became the author of *Notes of an Exile to Van Dieman's Land*, published in 1846. The research into the eight hundred Africans transported to the Australian colonies discussed in several chapters in this book is continuing, and promises to provide a revealing aspect of the Black Atlantic diasporic story.

The desire for more global and transnational approaches has had a growing effect on the history of political and social movements, such as the labour movement, feminism, and movements against racism and colonialism. As Sean Scalmer has put it, 'the emerging forms of global economy and culture have stimulated a recent, feverish interest in the possibilities of social movements in a globalised environment'.³¹ And this search for globalised social movements in the present has stimulated an interest in the internationalism of political and social movements in the past—whether socialist, anti-communist, anti-racist, or feminist. Historians internationally have noted the international circulation of ideas and the transnational scope of earlier political movements.³² Labour and feminist historians in particular have developed an international and comparative approach, deriving from the internationalism of the labour movement and feminism themselves.³³ Australian contributions to these histories of international political movements include, most notably, the work by Patricia Grimshaw

³¹ Sean Scalmer, 'Translating Contention: Culture, History, and the Circulation of Collective Action', *Alternative* 25 (2000): 491–514.

³² Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Fontana, 1997); James A. Miller, Susan D. Pennybacker, and Eve Rosenhaft, 'Mother Ada Wright and the International Campaign to Save the Scottsboro Boys', *American Historical Review* 106 (April 2001): 387–432.

³³ Mrinalini Sinha, Angela Woollacott and Donna Guy, eds, *Feminisms and Internationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

in the operations of gender and race in the suffrage movements in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.³⁴

One of the most serious areas for transnational historical scholarship is the study of the history of genocide. Stimulated by debates over the 'uniqueness' of the Holocaust, many historians have agreed that genocides which occur in one part of the world at one point in time are somehow connected to, or at least illuminating of, genocidal processes and actions elsewhere. Such an awareness has only recently emerged in Australia: while historians have long been interested in the question of the 'extermination' and 'extinction' of Aboriginal peoples, it is only recently that they have begun to consider the word 'genocide' as applying to Australia, and sought to place their discussion in a broader international context. The question of genocide has been part of Australian public debate since the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's 1997 report *Bringing Them Home*, which investigated the history and effects of Aboriginal child removal in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and argued that Australian child removal practices fell within the definition of genocide used in the United Nations 1948 Genocide convention.³⁵ This aspect of the report horrified many Australians of quite varying political views. Subsequent arguments have focused on the assimilation and absorption policies of the twentieth century, attempting to determine whether such policies had genocidal intent, that is, the destruction of Aboriginal peoples as identifiable human groups. The 'genocide' word has more recently been applied to the discussion of violence and death on the frontiers of settlement, as outlined by Henry Reynolds in *An Indelible Stain: The Question of Genocide in Australia's History*.³⁶ A recent issue of the journal *Aboriginal History* has explored the ways in which other histories of genocide might illuminate our understanding of Australian history.³⁷

The 'genocide' debate has been a fraught one for Australian public and professional debate. In a striking essay entitled 'Neighbours: Poles, Jews and the Aboriginal Question', Martin Krygier has noted the strong similarities between current debates in Poland over the slaughter of the Jews of the village of Jedwabne by their Polish neighbours on 10 July 1941, and those in Australia over settler histories, especially over the 'Stolen Generations' and frontier massacres. In both cases, he notes, there is a series of phases by which a dark aspect of the past is publicly debated: revelation (exposure of a hitherto little-recognised past), shock, disputations of the details, debates over whether these

³⁴ Patricia Grimshaw, 'Writing About White Women in New Societies: Americans in Hawaii, Anglo-Australians in Colonial Victoria', *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 9, no. 2 (1990): 20-32; Patricia Grimshaw, 'Reading the Silences: Suffrage Activists and Race and Nineteenth-Century Settler Societies', in *Citizenship, Women and Social Justice: International Historical Perspectives*, eds Joy Damousi and Katherine Ellinghaus (Melbourne: Department of History, University of Melbourne, 1999), 30-42.

³⁵ *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

³⁶ Henry Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain: The Question of Genocide in Australia's History* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2001).

³⁷ See the collection of essays under the title 'Genocide? Australian Indigenous History in an International Context' in *Aboriginal History* 25 (2001); cf. Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?*

events were particular or indicated something more general and sinister, denunciation, apprehension about world opinion, and finally transformation of the issue into a central aspect of public debate.³⁸

Diasporic histories

A fast-growing and especially interesting form of transnational history is *diasporic* history. William Safran, in an essay in the first issue of the journal *Diaspora* in 1991, defined diasporas as 'expatriate minority communities' that were dispersed, continuing to remember their homeland and feeling outsiders in their new country, and seeing their ancestral home as a place of eventual return. James Clifford has pointed out that the term has now been diluted, so that many diasporic communities no longer seek return, and identify with one another as much as an originary homeland. 'For better or worse', he writes, 'diaspora discourse is being widely appropriated. It is loose in the world, for reasons having to do with decolonisation, increased immigration, global communications, and transport'.³⁹ In this new, looser, sense, diasporic histories set out to investigate the experiences of people with a common origin who have migrated to different parts of the globe, forming diasporic communities that relate both to their place of origin, their place of re-settlement, and to one another. They are crucially concerned with questions of identity, tracing the multiple identities of diasporic peoples. Historians have begun to explore these diasporic entities; there is now, for example, a series of diasporic histories being produced for Routledge by Robin Cohen, in which books on Sikh, Italian, Hindu diasporas have appeared, and many others are to come.

How are Australian historians to respond to these developments? As a highly immigrant society for two centuries, Australians must surely be part of worldwide diasporic histories. Yet while there have been many studies of immigration policies and immigration to Australia, many of the studies of particular ethnic communities have been part of a tradition of 'ethnic contribution' histories, studying the contribution of the Chinese, Italian, Jewish, or perhaps Scots or Irish, to Australia's development and forms of culture and society. These histories have rarely been truly diasporic in the sense of connecting the historical experience of these groups in Australia with those of their counterparts elsewhere.⁴⁰

³⁸ Martin Krygier, 'Neighbours: Poles, Jews and the Aboriginal Question', *Australian Book Review* (April 2002): 37-43.

³⁹ James Clifford, 'Diasporas', in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 249.

⁴⁰ See, for example, the books in the Australian Ethnic Heritage Series, all published by Ae Press in Melbourne in 1986: Michael Cigler, *The Afghans In Australia*; Ray Aitchison, *The Americans In Australia*; Betty Birskys, Antanas Birskys and others, *The Baltic Peoples In Australia: Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians*; Barry York, *The Maltese In Australia*; Olavi Koivukangas and John Stanley Martin, *The Scandinavians In Australia*; Al Grassby, *The Spanish In Australia*. See also Jurgen Tampke and Colin Doxford, *Willkommen: A History of the Germans in Australia* (Sydney: New South Wales University Press, 1990).

Recently, some historians have begun to urge a more diasporic approach. This is especially evident amongst those interested in Chinese-Australian history, where increasing exchanges are developing with Chinese-American scholars, as well as with those working in China and Taiwan on Chinese diasporic communities generally. Henry Chan, in particular, has argued for the importance of seeing Chinese migrations to Australia in the broader context of Chinese migration and settlement elsewhere.⁴¹ Brian Aboud has examined the historiography of Arab migrations to Australia, Canada, and the United States, looking for both the 'micro-practices of rule and resistance' and the 'macro-structures and processes that are determinant of transnational migration'.⁴² John Docker has considered aspects of Australian Jewish historical experience in the context of wider Jewish diasporic histories.⁴³

Perhaps the most complex issue to be faced in diasporic histories is that of whether we can speak of an 'English' (or 'British') diaspora. Eric Richards has adopted the diasporic framework for his admirably ambitious current project on the history of British emigration around the world since the seventeenth century. Further debate is needed on the appropriateness of the term 'diaspora' for British emigration and settlement histories, given the connections between British emigration and Britain's history of colonial and imperial power. Although the term, as Clifford pointed out, has in the last decade developed a wider meaning than it used to have, I wonder whether it has widened so far as to include the English, peoples who generally migrated to places where they became ruling or numerically dominant populations; peoples whose cultural identity shifted towards new national allegiances, who had little sense of being outsiders and usually relatively little desire to return. The challenge, it seems to me, is to connect the history of British (especially English) migration to Australia to the broader history of British migration, while at the same time retaining awareness that this migration history cannot escape or ignore the larger framework of a history of colonisation and empire. These histories of colonisation and empire make it impossible to place British alongside non-British immigration as simply another form of migration, however desperate the circumstances of particular British immigrants, like the convicts, may have been.

World histories

World history, often prompted by pedagogical considerations, but also by the desire for historians to attempt, once again, to understand the 'big picture', takes

⁴¹ Henry Chan, 'Becoming Chinese But Remaining Australasian: The Future of the Down Under Chinese Past' in *The Overseas Chinese in Australasia: History, Settlement and Interactions*, eds Henry Chan, Nora Chiang, and Ann Curthoys (Taipei and Canberra: National Taiwan University and Australian National University, 2001), 1-15.

⁴² Brian Aboud, 'The Arab Diaspora: Immigration History and the Narratives of Presence, Australia, Canada, and the USA' in *Arab-Australians Today: Censorship and Belonging*, ed. Ghassan Hage (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002).

⁴³ John Docker, *1492: The Poetics of Diaspora* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001).

a holistic view of world historical processes, and typically operates on a very long human time span, in which national formation is but a small part. World history is often concerned with the themes of evolution, migration, empire, environment, modes of production and exchange, and human mobility and diversity. It has faced some difficult issues, especially over the problem of overcoming the Eurocentrism of earlier attempts at world history.⁴⁴

Generally speaking, Australia plays an insignificant part in these world histories, and sometimes when it is included, as in Marc Ferro's *Colonization: A Global History*, nearly every detail is incorrect.⁴⁵ Yet there are some interesting exceptions. Historians with knowledge of Australian history are starting to enter the territory of world history, and one to have made an interesting attempt is Geoffrey Blainey, in his *A Short History of the World*.⁴⁶ Jared Diamond's hugely popular *Guns, Germs, and Steel* uses the Australian case significantly to support his argument that the development of agriculture and the domestication of animals in some parts of the world and not others depended not on differences in intelligence between peoples but rather on the availability or otherwise of domesticable plants and animals. Australia, being without such plants and animals, was thus inhospitable to the development of agriculture.⁴⁷ Tom Griffiths, Libby Robin, and Richard Grove are also placing Australia within a world wide framework, in their case by focusing on issues such as environmental history, ecology, and empire, the processes whereby plants and animals have been moved around the globe, transforming landscapes, eating habits, and cultural and political life in the process.⁴⁸ With considerable work in progress in this field, we can expect some major new approaches to emerge shortly.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Blainey, *A Short History of the World* (Melbourne: Viking, 2000); David Christian was featured in an article, 'For Big History, the Past Begins at the Beginning' www.nytimes.com/2002/01/12. Some important texts include: William McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963), which is auto-critiqued in 'The Rise of the West after Twenty-Five Years', *Journal of World History* 1 (1990): 1–22 and 'World History and the Rise and Fall of the West', *Journal of World History* 9 (1998): 215–36; Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, 'World History in a Global Age', *American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 1034–60; A.G. Hopkins, 'The History of Globalization—and the Globalization of History?' in *Globalization in World History*, ed. Hopkins.

⁴⁵ Marc Ferro, *Colonization: A Global History* (Quebec: World Heritage Press, 1997).

⁴⁶ Blainey, *A Short History of the World*.

⁴⁷ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997).

⁴⁸ Richard Grove, *Ecology, Climate and Empire: Colonialism and Global Environmental History, 1400–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin, eds, *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997). See also Stephen J. Pyne, *Burning Bush: A Fire History of Australia* (New York: Holt, 1991); Thomas Dunlap, *Nature and the English Diaspora: Environment and History in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Janie Carruthers' chapter in *Inflows: The Channel Country*, ed. Mandy Martin (Mandurama, NSW: Mandy Martin, 2001).

If the trend is towards Australian participation in transnational histories of various kinds, the question remains: how will Australian readers respond to the new histories? Can historians, in their search for transnational histories and international audiences, still speak strongly and engagingly to their local national audience? Will Australians, focused on their own problems and own questions of national identity, read histories where Australian processes, experiences, and events receive only *some* of the attention? Finding ways to address both local and international audiences, and to make a difference to both, seems to me to be the biggest challenge of all facing historians in Australia (and elsewhere) in the next decade.

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