

CHAPTER 1



HISTORY UNDER FIRE

‘One of the more insidious developments in Australian political life over the past decade or so has been the attempt to rewrite Australian history in the service of a partisan political cause.’ The speaker was John Howard, and he spoke in the aftermath of his electoral triumph in 1996.

The new prime minister was brooding over his tribulations in opposition when he had lost the 1987 election, then the party leadership, until in 1995 a desperate Liberal Party turned to him once again. He could now settle accounts with those who had written him off as an outmoded traditionalist clinging to a Dreamtime in the 1950s when the family was secure behind the white picket fence, when Robert Menzies guided the nation’s destinies with patrician dignity and a young Queen Elizabeth embodied a stable moral order.

Paul Keating had been the chief tormenter. He had taunted Howard in 1992 as yesterday’s man who yearned to turn the clock back to an era of the Morphy Richards toaster, the Qualcast mower, the Astor TV console and the AWA

radiogram, armchair and slippers. Howard now accused Keating of having sought to ‘demean, pillory and tear down many great people of Australia’s past who had no opportunity to answer back’.

John Howard was also looking forward to the devices that he would employ as he consolidated his national leadership. The campaign slogan in 1996 was ‘For All Of Us’, but that had captured a bare majority of voters. Once the Coalition was in office, the ‘us’ needed clarification. An early designation was ‘the mainstream’, but this was hardly more expressive.

Howard then hit upon ‘the battlers’, the ordinary Australians who made no claim for special attention and wanted nothing more than a fair go. His avowed intention was that they should feel ‘relaxed and comfortable’ as they enjoyed a respite from the hectoring pyrotechnics of his predecessor’s ‘big picture’. An earnest of intentions was his scrapping of the principal multicultural agencies. In the following year he dashed hopes for reconciliation with Indigenous Australians. Then the government refused to agree to an international agreement on greenhouse emissions. Then the republic was despatched, and later the refugees were turned away.

These and other decisions marked out a strategy of refusal, but threaded together they formed more than a necklace of negatives. Each one of them combined conviction and calculation. Howard spoke from the heart but his script was informed by constant measurement of public opinion and careful political management. His government acted in the national interest but with a shrewd appreciation of wedge politics. It erased the components of Keating’s Big Picture, one after another, dismissing each one of them as pandering to the interests of a selfish minority.

Keating had painted his Big Picture in the speeches he delivered while prime minister. An aggressively demotic speaker, at his best and worst in impromptu invective, Keating was a more diffident and awkward presenter of prepared addresses; but he appreciated the importance of such state-

ments and developed a close rapport with his speechwriter, the historian Don Watson. He placed particular emphasis on the commemoration of historic sites—Winton for the centenary of ‘Waltzing Matilda’ and Corowa for that of its federal conference, as well as the Western Front, the Kokoda Track, Changi and Hellfire Pass—and he put new places on the map of Australian history, such as Redfern Park.

At home and abroad he built up a story of a people who had suffered but overcome. They had triumphed over their tribulations and prejudices to embrace diversity and tolerance with an egalitarian generosity that would enable them to engage with their Asian neighbours and flourish in the open, globalised economy. This was the national story that held together the Big Picture and it came under immediate attack from John Howard. Speaking in the Commonwealth parliament in October 1996, the prime minister declared: ‘I do not take the black armband view of Australian history . . . I believe that the balance sheet of Australian history is overwhelmingly a positive one.’

The Black Armband epithet had been minted three years earlier by the historian Geoffrey Blainey. He used it to characterise what he thought was an excessive emphasis in recent historical writing on past wrongs. This mournful view of Australian history, he suggested, had arisen among a younger generation of historians as a reaction to an earlier ‘Three Cheers’ view, but the pendulum had swung too far and the Black Armband historians gave an unduly negative account of history’s balance sheet.

Mixing Blainey’s metaphor further, Howard claimed that ‘the balance sheet of Australian history is a very generous and benign one’. While allowing that there were some ‘black marks upon our history’, he warned of risks if discussion was confined to ‘the shortcomings of previous generations’. The risk was increased when ‘highly selective views of Australian history’ were used for ‘endless and agonised navel-gazing about who we are or, as seems to have happened over recent

years, as part of a “perpetual seminar” for elite opinion about our national identity’.

The argument moved here from Keating’s appropriation of Australian history to the ‘elites’ who created such tendentially self-indulgent accounts of the past and the present. The elites provided Howard with a foil for the battlers, whose achievements and sentiments they blackened. It was a nebulous category and an odd term of opprobrium from a man who held the highest national office and who mixed regularly with the wealthy and powerful. These elites variously comprised commentators of progressive sympathy, champions of minority groups, middle-class do-gooders and especially the intellectuals who articulated their concerns.

A synonym, ‘the chattering class’, became especially popular among the conservative pundits who pontificated incessantly in the op-ed pages of the national press and intoned indignantly on talk-back radio. They demanded to be liberated from political correctness—another catchphrase Howard employed freely as he felt his way into his role—while he purged the nation’s institutions of those who dissented from the new orthodoxies.

These heretics had been described earlier as ‘whingeing intellectuals, busily manufacturing episodes in the nation’s past to complain about’, and this activity had created a ‘guilt industry’ that prosecuted ‘a campaign which has been designed above all to delegitimise the settlement of this country’. Howard’s former adviser Gerard Henderson asserted in 1993 that ‘Much of our history is taught by the alienated and discontented. Australia deserves better. It is time to junk guilt and alienation.’ His final rallying-cry, ‘Down with the falsification of Australian history’, had the ring of a Stalinist ideologue calling down the wrath of the people on dissident intellectuals.

John Howard did not create the anxiety about Australian history but he raised it to a higher level of national prominence. Before he gained office the champions of patriotic history operated as lonely knights errant who challenged the

dragons that roamed through the corridors of Australian universities. They sallied forth from conservative fortresses such as *Quadrant* and the *IPA Review*, sometimes cheered on in the press or parliament, only to retire discomfited from the conflict.

They sought in vain a champion who would rid them of the most frightening of the monsters, Manning Clark, who had escaped into the public realm to spread discord and confusion. They welcomed an academic martyr, Geoffrey Blainey, who planted his standard in 1984 at Warrnambool in defence of the old Australia; and they essayed an assault during the Bicentenary of 1988. But the company of the Black Armband held the field, reaching out into the country's schools, its cultural institutions, courts and the public conscience.

Since 1996 the insurgents have enjoyed official patronage. They have been appointed to the governing bodies of the ABC, the National Museum and other public agencies that present history to the public. They are awarded consultancies to advise on school curricula. They have redoubled their campaign to discredit Manning Clark with a reckless assertion that he was an agent of influence for the Soviet Union—the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* ran an eight-page spread just seven weeks after the prime minister denounced the rewriting of history. They publicise their views freely through a sympathetic press, and enjoy favourable publicity as they seek to discredit Aboriginal land claimants, deny that the Stolen Generations were taken from their families, and insist that the European occupation of Australia was remarkably peaceful.

And in all of this they condemn the history profession for its refusal to tell the truth about Australian history. The history departments of the country's universities are said to be dominated by 'tenured radicals' who cling to the discredited liberation struggles of the sixties, who collude in each other's shoddy scholarship, and suppress anyone who challenges their orthodoxies.



Historians are no strangers to political surveillance. In 1953, when Russel Ward began his doctoral research at the new Australian National University, a security file accompanied him to Canberra. Until 1949 he had been a member of the Communist Party and the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation kept close watch on such intellectuals. 'I am sure that you will readily appreciate', its director-general wrote to the prime minister in 1952, 'the inadvisability of employing, in any University, lecturers who are likely to infest students with subversive doctrines'. He ordered his regional offices to vet all universities: they compiled staff lists, compared them to their own security dossiers and identified all those of suspect loyalty.

These dossiers were compiled on the basis of press clippings, surveillance, phone taps, infiltration and cultivation of informants. Ward's application for a driver's licence went onto the file to provide a record of his handwriting. He was observed to have joined the Fellowship of Australian Writers; to have attended parties at the home of Don Baker, a lecturer in history, while the cars of known communists were parked at the same address; to have visited the house of Bob Gollan, 'the leading Communist in Canberra', and also that of Manning Clark.

A visit to Alec Hope was noteworthy because ASIO believed this eminently conservative poet and professor of English to have had contact with Vladimir Petrov, the defector from the Soviet Embassy. ASIO even noted that Ward visited the home of his supervisor, Laurie Fitzhardinge, who had appeared before the Petrov inquiry.

At the end of 1955, as Ward completed his doctoral thesis, he applied for a lectureship in history at the New South Wales University of Technology. He did so at the invitation of Max Hartwell, the professor of economic history and dean of the Faculty of Humanities; and the selection committee unanimously recommended his appointment. He learned from Hartwell that the vice-chancellor had rejected the appointment on the grounds that Ward 'had been active in seditious

circles in Canberra'. He also learned that the chancellor was involved in the decision. The chancellor, Wallace Wurth, was the chairman of the New South Wales Public Service Board.

Hartwell, no sympathiser with Ward's politics, was appalled by this infringement of academic principle, fought it unsuccessfully and resigned to take a post in Oxford. While ASIO denied that it had provided information to the university, it sent the prime minister a report on the matter, kept watch over the ensuing arguments at Kensington and noted that Ward 'was of such character and reputation that no Australian university could or would possibly employ him'.

Ward appealed to leading historians for public support and was advised to go quietly. He returned to high school teaching in New South Wales and ASIO recorded that 'he is very bitter as he considers his Communist background has been held against him in his application for several positions'. The University of New England, to its credit, offered him a post and he accepted it in early 1957. That too was noted by ASIO with no further comment.

The Ward affair came to national attention three years later when Max Hartwell told of it. After criticism in parliament from the Labor Party, Menzies stated that 'the Commonwealth security organisation did not supply any information at all in relation to these matters'. In fact, the director-general of ASIO's minute recorded that 'I don't think we ever vetted Ward for anything. Sometimes Wurth asked us about specially important appointments but I don't think he did so in this case.' For good measure, ASIO recorded that in 1946 Max Hartwell had addressed a meeting of the Sydney University Labour Club.

The Ward affair was an episode in the Cold War. The suspicion attached to his communist past and his continuing association with communists and others of suspect loyalty. The fact that these friendships with Manning Clark, Don Baker, Eric Fry, Bob Gollan, Margaret Kiddle and others arose from shared interests in Australian history seems to have escaped the

ASIO officers, as did the possibility that a visit to the home of Laurie Fitzhardinge might have been a necessary expedient for someone seeking guidance from this notoriously lax supervisor.

Ward's involvement in the progressive Fellowship of Australian Writers was significant along with his membership of the Australian Folk Lore Society because of the radical reputation of such bodies rather than their relevance to his doctoral thesis. There is not a single reference in ASIO's records to Russel Ward's thesis, which he worked into a book in 1958. That book, *The Australian Legend*, would not only reorient Australian history, it would also undermine the whole scheme of values on which the security regime of Menzies and ASIO rested.

Security agencies no longer compile dossiers on historians of suspect loyalty, or if they do the information no longer determines university decisions. Political sympathies are still of concern to government, but they now affect its appointments to councils of museums, libraries, archives and other public bodies that preserve and present the past. The current invigilation of academics is conducted in the media and it goes beyond their political associations to what they write and teach and say about Australian history. It is a public surveillance, without the clandestine character that made Russel Ward so bitter, but no less intimidating. This is the History Wars.



The Wars are not restricted to this country. When Margaret Thatcher set out to restore pride in Britain's past, she took a particular interest in school history. So too did her counterparts in the United States, who reacted with indignation to the appearance of national standards in school history in 1994. The conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh told his radio audience that the standards were part of an America-bashing

multicultural agenda, indoctrinating students that 'our country is inherently evil'. By 99 votes to 1, the US Senate condemned the standards. Bob Dole, who was running for the Republican presidential nomination, told the American Legionnaires on Labor Day that a generation of historians were members of 'intellectual elites who seem embarrassed by America'.

The term 'History Wars' gained currency there, and provided the title for a book on a controversy that erupted earlier in 1994 when the Smithsonian Museum prepared an exhibition to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Pacific War. Its invitation that visitors ponder the moral legitimacy of using the atomic bomb against Japan brought accusations from Newt Gingrich, a historian who had become Republican leader in the House of Representatives, that 'a certain political correctness' was 'seeping in and distorting and prejudicing the Smithsonian's exhibits'. A conservative political commentator wrote that 'the familiar ideology of campus political correctness' had been 'imported whole into our national museum structure'.

That history war was fought over war history, but the term spread across a wide front. The language those who fight the History Wars employ is one of vigilant resolution against a hateful enemy that seeks to denigrate the nation, to infiltrate institutions and corrupt impressionable minds. Those who prosecute the war speak often of killing. The retired Canadian historian, J. L. Granatstein, asked *Who Killed Canadian History?* and answered that the culprits included the politicians, the bureaucrats and his former university colleagues who practised the new modes of social feminist and multicultural history that confused, misled and bored students.

The retired Australian academic, Keith Windschuttle, published a strident polemic in 1994 about *The Killing of History*. He suggested that the discipline and practice of history was suffering a potentially mortal attack from pernicious theorists who asserted that it was impossible to tell the truth about the past, who were hostile to the idea of an objective, knowable

past. The anxiety extends from what historians say about the past to the methods they employ to say it.



In the dog-days of Labor government in Victoria at the beginning of the 1990s, after Joan Kirner succeeded John Cain, a teacher at a private secondary school jumped onto the conservative bandwagon. He contributed articles to the Melbourne press alleging that progressive education was eroding educational standards. Among his bogeys was post-modernism, a body of theory he could not articulate but which he portrayed as a form of intellectual nihilism that threatened to destroy truth and beauty. He was duly rewarded after Jeffrey Kennett swept into power by appointment as a consultant to the state's education department, and for good measure he secured a contract to prepare curriculum materials in Australian studies.

To develop the materials he turned to a postgraduate student in the History Department at the University of Melbourne. The early drafts were not to his liking, as they seemed to employ the very sort of history to which he was opposed. There was too much gloomy stuff, including a treatment of the 1930s Depression that explained how deflation allowed the wealthy to buy more. Discussion proved unproductive and he turned finally to the whiteboard. Dividing it in two halves, he labelled one 'Blainey' and the other 'Manning Clark'. The first was good history, he explained, the other bad.

The hapless researcher reported the incident to me with a mixture of amusement and alarm. Amusement because he had a healthy sense of humour and appreciated that Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey, whom Clark had taught, shared a regard for each other despite their different ways of writing history. Heightened amusement because it was Geoffrey Blainey who had explained this effect of the Depression to him. Alarm because the proposition that different camps of

historical interpretation could be polarised so sharply, the one deemed impermissible and the other obligatory, violated the procedures of scholarship he had learned ever since he began studying history as an undergraduate.

Learning history meant learning to make your own judgements: historians are not used to being told what they should write. Historians reach judgements by consideration of the issues, examination of the evidence, weighing of the arguments. They might well be influenced by an earlier treatment of the subject, particularly if it is provided by an influential historian, and they often undertake the inquiry with their own preferences and expectations. But the inquiry has to be conducted by the procedures of historical scholarship: the relevant literature has to be discussed, the relevant evidence assembled, assessed and set in context, its interpretation justified. These are the procedures that guide the historian. They make it possible for other historians to test the validity of the conclusions, to distinguish history that has warrant from accounts of the past that lack it. The procedures constitute history as a discipline.

If those who commenced the History Wars set out as paladins rescuing the honour of their country, the historians feel themselves the targets in a different kind of warfare. The History Wars opened with a series of pre-emptive strikes launched from conservative think-tanks and their house journals. During the repeated assaults on Manning Clark in the 1970s and early 1980s, the inability of his assailants to find historians who would condemn him confirmed their feeling that the profession was providing safe haven to dangerous radicals. When twenty-three of Geoffrey Blainey's colleagues in the History Department at the University of Melbourne wrote in 1984 to the press to regret his statements on Asian migration, the suspicion mounted. Arguments leading up to the Bicentenary in 1988 heightened accusations of a *trahison des clercs*. In the subsequent campaign against Black Armband history, some fear that the very discipline of history is at risk of

collateral damage from its protagonists' weapons of mass destruction.

Historians are ill prepared for such public controversy. They are accustomed to argument—their whole training prepares them to deal with different interpretations of the past—but not to the forms of unilateral assertion that they encounter in the History Wars, where motives are impugned and personal aspersions levelled. Their natural habitat is the seminar, the conference and the academic journal, where the rules of debate are understood and observed. They are less familiar with the media, unused to the polemical style it practises. The press release, the embargo, the immediate deadline and the backgrounding of sympathetic journalists are not part of their repertoire. Since 1996 they have found it increasingly difficult to put their side of the argument in this milieu, so that the prejudices of the columnists and commentators who dominate the national media pass largely unchallenged.

While journalists often ring historians, seeking information (what is the greatest margin of a leadership challenge in federal politics?) or opinion (who were the three greatest prime ministers?) to fill out an interpretive piece, they are much less interested in these historians' research activities. An archaeological discovery is news, as is a scientific breakthrough, but the work of historians is not. It lacks precision and the authority of the experimental finding.

Perhaps it is too familiar, for many feature writers have their own views on what happened in Australian history and see academic historians as making simple and familiar subjects seem complicated and disturbing. The History Warriors, on the other hand, provide good copy. They tell a simple story with great certainty, assuage unease and put the pedants in their place. As the History Wars developed, they became the staple fare of tabloid media and talk-back radio, but they also found a ready outlet in the quality press.



The purpose of this book is to provide a response to the History Wars. It follows the main phases and theatres of the conflict, from the early attempts to discredit Manning Clark to the present efforts to deny frontier massacres and to intervene in the National Museum. Anna Clark contributes a chapter on a particularly contested area, the teaching of Australian history in schools. As we relate each of the campaigns we identify the critics, examine their arguments and evaluate their efforts to rewrite Australian history.

This approach clearly differs from that of John Howard, who complained in 1996 of an attempt to rewrite Australian history in a partisan political cause, and who criticised the historians who contributed to that process of national denigration. The conservative metaphor of the History Wars implies a conflict between adversaries, and it is clear that not all historians are pacifists. In 1970 the young Humphrey McQueen published an attack on the existing historical interpretation of Australian labour history. 'For the next two hundred odd pages', he announced in the Introduction, 'I shout, wave my arms and frantically dash from one battlefield to another'.

McQueen was an unusually pugnacious controversialist but it is undeniable that the historians of his generation did change the understanding of Australian history, as historians before and since have done. It is in the nature of history as a research activity that it should generate additional knowledge and novel interpretations. It is inherent in history as a branch of the humanities that it should respond to changing concerns. The suggestion that rewriting history is a sinister activity rests on a naïve view of the past as something fixed, fully disclosed and final, a record of immanent truth that only malcontents could deny. An account of the History Wars should therefore begin with a consideration of what historians do and how they have shaped the understanding of Australian history.