

## History at the Crossroads. Australians and the Past

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*History at the Crossroads. Australians and the Past* is the latest work from Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton, founding editors of *Public History Review* and the co-directors of the Australian Centre for Public History based at the University of Technology in Sydney. This interesting book draws both upon their experience as leading public history practitioners in Australia and as the directors of a major national project, *Australians and the Past*. The project, comprising 300 telephone and 150 face-to-face interviews, sought to investigate the ways in which Australians thought about, evaluated and used the past, and drew upon the pioneering work of Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen in the United States in the late 1990s.<sup>(1)</sup> *History at the Crossroads* takes forward earlier discussion of people's understanding and use of the past to also consider what is the role of history and historians within the public domain.

Unsurprisingly many British historians are concerned about the future of the discipline. This timely work considers the relationship between people's understanding of the past and the potential role for historians at times of political crisis. Michael Gove's invitation to Niall Ferguson and Simon Schama to help re-design the history school curriculum seems to have created less anxiety than the effect of the proposed higher education cuts upon the Humanities, which, if enacted, are likely to ensure that there will be far fewer students studying history at university level in the future. Organisations like the Royal Historical Society have rightly concerned themselves with this possible decline. Richard Overy in a recent article in the *Times Higher Education* argued:

The reference points for the historian must remain the intellectual framework within which research is generated and the body of academic opinion at which it is directed.

Overy argued for the creation of separate historical research institutes that would ensure the segregation of academic history from popular history. History, for him, was both separate from 'popular' history and heritage.<sup>(2)</sup> Overy's aim in writing this piece was to reinforce the importance of the study of history. This strategy with particular emphasis on the role of history in schools and universities is rather different to the approach adopted by Ashton and Hamilton.

Their starting point is outside academia and on the role of the past within the public domain. Rather than

focussing on rather obscure debates over the definition of public history they adopt a starting point from the late British historian Raphael Samuel, namely to argue that ‘if history was thought of as an activity rather than a profession, then the number of its practitioners would be legion’.(3) Thus they ensure that the book is an exploration of the different processes by which the past becomes created as history and the different forms this takes. In developing their exploration of different forms of history-making they also refer to a related point of Samuel’s that is, unfortunately, very apposite today, when he suggested that, ‘if there is reason to be anxious for the future of historical scholarship’, then cuts in library services, the break-up of local history collections and the re-organisation of record offices would be ‘at least as much a threat to research as cuts in postgraduate funding’.(4)

As a device to acknowledge the value of different forms of historical research, training and presentation Ashton and Hamilton adopt a metaphorical device to define history as ‘a house with many rooms’. Different types of historian, they suggest, inhabit different rooms and some inhabit more than one and others take visits to different parts of the house. Some residents, notably academic historians, they argue,

see themselves as occupying the principal room. Indeed, many from the academy insist that they are in possession of the house. But several have been visited by often unwanted guests in the form of politicians and ideologues, who seem hell bent on establishing a set of rules in parts of the house while exhibiting no sign of leaving (p. 8).

This co-existence between ‘people’s history’ or history in the ‘everyday world’ is used to raise questions about the role of the professional historian and who owns the past. In particular, they write against the political background of the so-called History Wars, in which those historians who had challenged the idea of Australia as a terra nullius or one in which colonisation and destruction of the indigenous peoples was a history of enlightened progress were subject to vilification.(5) Casualties had included the director of the new National Museum of Australia who had promoted alternative readings of the encounters between white colonists and indigenous people – and the displays were drastically edited. Later, even the brilliant novelist Kate Grenville, whose historically researched *The Secret River* challenged assumptions about early relationships between white and aboriginal communities, was castigated for her entry into a domain apparently the reserve simply of academic historians. As Ashton and Hamilton comment; ‘This history war was a turf war’ (p.22).

This book is not a re-working of earlier critiques of the history wars, however, but rather an analysis of grassroots and community explorations of the past that developed despite the national context. Chapters are grouped into different forms of history- making including the role of personal collections and material culture in developing historical meaning. Of particular interest are the chapters on family history, historical societies and anniversaries since they do not only provide meeting points with British historical practice but also remind us of the differences. Ashton and Hamilton argue, for example, that the growth in family history could be linked to increased secularisation and the decline in church-going. They suggest that engagements with family pasts are concerned with memorialisation and self preservation: ‘Having ancestors and descendants can be a way to live outside one lifetime as perhaps creating art or going to live with God may be for some’ (p.32). Also, by way of contrast with the British situation that saw local historical societies developing during the 19th century, the mean founding date for historical societies in Australia was 1973. (p.41)

However, commemorations and anniversaries have a longer past. The continuing, or rather revived, interest in Anzac day is explored carefully. They suggest that an emotional need for structure and tradition has ensured its survival while suggesting that Australian nationalism can incorporate changing social and political realities. Yet, they conclude, for most Australians the connection to the national past is ‘ultimately based’ on their relationship to personal pasts. In such conclusions Ashton and Hamilton reflect the conclusions of Rosenzweig and Thelen.

The chapter on professional historians is distinct from this earlier influence. Ashton and Hamilton argue that history inside universities became far more specialist leading to professional divisions between those working inside and outside the academy. They then analyse the way in which historians employed by local government, television or private corporations have created work outside the academy. They also discuss the work of those working on Native Title where indigenous communities are obliged legally to demonstrate continuous connection to their land to succeed in a land claim. (This is similar to the work of many public historians working in New Zealand on the implications of the Waitangi Treaty for Maori communities).<sup>(6)</sup> However, as they show, much of the energies of such historians went into founding professional associations more concerned with status than discussing innovative ways of creating accessible history. While arguing for a return to Samuel's more generous definition of the historical profession, Ashton and Hamilton tend to focus on differences between academic and professional historians rather than exploring new ways in which shared understandings might be created by historians working together with people interested in their own pasts. In their conclusion Ashton and Hamilton argue for further research into the role of schools and universities in shaping public awareness of the past as well as that increasingly undertaken by a range of communities. They suggest that professional historians of all kinds need to reach out to create partnerships and end cautiously saying, 'whether these activities will be carried out in partnership with professional historians of all kinds, or largely independent of them, remains to be seen' (p.137).

The parameters for such partnerships are not the same as in Britain. Partnerships created through Heritage Lottery-funded projects, and those in archives and museums between a range of historical practitioners indicate, in some ways, less hierarchical divisions than those perceived to exist in Australia.

Recent publications have started to explore public history in Britain.<sup>(7)</sup> This book should prove a useful addition both to such books and to the growing numbers of works on historiography written in accessible styles.<sup>(8)</sup> With its clearer written style and helpful bibliography it should prove a useful addition to reading lists for undergraduate and graduate students taking courses in historiography, heritage studies, museology and public history.

The lack of an index and some careless typographical errors – suggesting too much haste in the proofreading – are irritating. However, overall there is much here to welcome and help show directions for new ways in thinking about public history and the role of both historians – and people in general – in bringing the past into the present.

## Notes

1. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past. Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York, NY, 1998).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Richard Overy, 'The historical present', *Times Higher Education*, 29 April 2010.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London, 1994), p.19, as quoted in Ashton and Hamilton, p.8.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *ibid.*[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Also see Stuart Macintyre with Anna Clarke, *The History Wars* (2nd ed., Melbourne, 2004).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See Brownyn Dalley, 'Shades of grey: public history and government in New Zealand', in *People and their Pasts. Public History Today*, ed. Paul Ashton and Hilda Kean (Basingstoke, 2009), pp.74–90.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. See, for example, *The Public Historian*, 32, 3 (August 2010), special issue on Britain; *Hard Times*, Deutsch-englische Zeitschrift, 88 (2010), special issue on public history in Britain; Hilda Kean, *London Stories. Personal Lives, Public Histories* (London, 2004).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See for example, Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London, 2009); Jeremy Black, *Using History* (London, 2005); Jorma Kalela, *Making History. The Historian and Uses of the Past*, (Basingstoke, 2011) (forthcoming).[Back to \(8\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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