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Australia

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Introduction

Australian history education has been a topic of significant contest and controversy in recent years, generating heated debate over both content and methodology. Until the late 1980s, this was largely a professional discussion conducted by teachers, curriculum designers and academics, and it focused on questions of delivery: Should history be taught as a discrete discipline or within an integrated approach such as social studies? To what extent should history curricula in Australia be mandated? And how do we stop declining enrolments in the subject?

In recent years, however, these professional pedagogical concerns have been increasingly complicated by a public and political debate over the national narrative. School history has been a critical area of these 'history wars', generating an often ferocious and polarised discussion over the subject. Consequently, pedagogical questions of how to teach history in schools have been joined by a very public contest over *what* to teach.

Context and Background

History teachers, academics and curriculum officials have long engaged in passionate debates about the subject in Australia. The move to reposition history as a stand-alone discipline in recent years has generated significant discussion—just as the push to integrate the subject into social studies did a generation previously. Teachers have also been pressured to prove the 'rele-

vance' of history compared with popular subjects such as psychology and business studies. This professional historical discourse has engaged with questions of historical practice, relevance and pedagogy and has, for the most part, been conducted in history teaching journals and at conferences and curriculum development meetings around the country.¹

Meanwhile, a very public and anxious debate over Australia's past has been mounting. In the 1960s and 1970s, shifting historical interpretations challenged traditional narratives of Australia and its colonial history in particular. The British settlement was increasingly critiqued from Indigenous perspectives, and the social histories of women, migrants and workers also challenged the nation-building narratives of conventional Australian history. But this inclusion did not go unopposed. Some felt it was too progressive; that this retelling of the national story had come at the expense of the 'Australian Achievement'.²

By 1988, the year of Australia's bicentenary, these two narratives—of the Australian Achievement and its revisionist critique—were dominating public debate about the past. Politicians took sides too. The conservative side of politics tended to reject revisionist histories for being too critical and too apologetic. The Labor Party pushed for reconciliation with Indigenous people and an official apology for the forced removal and institutionalisation of Indigenous children (the Stolen Generations) during the twentieth century. This debate was prominent in the media and in politics, and it was fought over museum exhibits, national commemorations *and* history syllabuses. In particular, the use of the word 'invasion' in curriculum documents and history texts to describe British colonisation was a potent catalyst for historical debate.³

Increasingly, these parallel debates—of history methods, on the one hand, and the history wars, on the other hand—intersected. Public contest over content became infused with concern over pedagogy. Likewise, professional discussion about the discipline became inseparable from the public debates over the past that were prominent in the media and in politics.

These historical discourses of methodology and content came to a head in the most recent push to develop a national curriculum. On the eve of Australia Day in 2006, the conservative Prime Minister John Howard gave a speech that outlined his desire for a greater understanding and appreciation of Australian history and culture. Howard's speech responded to growing public anxiety about national knowledge among young people, as well as questions of social cohesion following worrying race riots in the Sydney suburb of Cronulla the previous month. The prime minister called for a 'root and branch renewal' of the subject in schools, and his plea became a catalyst for a consuming public debate over Australian history education.⁴

Howard's speech was taken up by a number of conservative public commentators and politicians concerned about the state of the subject in schools. For many of these opinion makers, history had become too progressive and too politically correct. National knowledge had declined among young people; the history curriculum had become fragmented across Australia's states and territories. Consequently, they worried, national identity and belonging were themselves under threat. As the educationist Kevin Donnelly asked: 'Was John Howard correct this week? Has the teaching of history fallen victim to a politically correct, New Age approach to curriculum, and are students receiving a fragmented understanding of the past? The evidence suggests "yes"'.⁵ In another article for *The Australian*, Janet Albrechtsen was just as unequivocal: 'there is much work to be done in undoing the progressive curriculum foisted on Australian schoolchildren'.⁶

Many teachers and historians were more wary: while agreeing with the prime minister's call for renewal of the subject, they insisted any new approach should not be at the expense of the subject's complexity or its potential to foster critical thinking. Speaking on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's '7.30 Report', the historian Stuart Macintyre acknowledged the need for a stronger national history curriculum, so long as that was not at the expense of critical engagement in the classroom: 'I think we would all agree that we need to do more to restore history, but we need to make sure that that is open to diverse viewpoints and that it is not simply an exercise in indoctrination'.⁷ Annabel Astbury, the professional services manager at the History Teachers' Association of Victoria, hoped that history's complexity would not be overlooked during the summit. 'It is only through teaching the celebrated with the uncelebrated that the values of tolerance, empathy and compassion emerge', she insisted. 'A history class free from question and repudiation therefore does not augur well in producing "good citizens"'.⁸

In these two responses, the parallel concerns of content and method are apparent. And the debate about the national curriculum shows how those political and pedagogical interests in history education came together in the Australian context. On the one hand, there was a largely conservative call for what could be called *national literacy*, where all Australians know their nation's history, understand its values and display national pride appropriately. On the other was the professional debate, calling for a very different sort of 'literacy' from the emphasis on national knowledge heard in the anxious public debates about the state of history education in Australia. Here was a call for 'historical literacy': a view of the subject that acknowledges the importance of knowing the nation's story, as well as learning historical skills, reconciling different perspectives and developing students' own judgements and ideas about the past.⁹

These two distinct discourses have continued to shape the public debate over Australian history teaching. A few months after Howard's Australia Day speech, the then federal Minister for Education, Julie Bishop, announced a national history summit, comprising eminent historians and public commentators from around the country, to develop a new approach to teaching the nation's past. 'The time has come for a renaissance in the teaching of Australian history in our schools', she insisted. 'By the time students finish their secondary schooling, they must have a thorough understanding of their nation's past'.¹⁰

The summit was a microcosm for the wider debate: it highlighted the politicised contest over national memory as well as the professional concerns of historical integrity and teachability—whatever the government produced would be worthless if it could not be taught well. After a series of drafts and reviews, the Howard Government went to the 2007 election with a proposed national curriculum and a determination to 'restore a proper narrative and a proper understanding of Australian history'.¹¹ Despite losing office, John Howard's desire for a national curriculum that included history was endorsed by the incoming Labor government. And, following its election in 2007, successive Labor prime ministers supported the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA) to develop a national history curriculum.

Those Labor governments did not escape criticism over history teaching, however. Concern came from a number of conservative politicians who argued that the curriculum draft was too progressive in its focus on Indigenous, environmental and Asian perspectives. And soon after the Labor Party lost power in 2013, the newly elected Education Minister, Christopher Pyne, announced a review of the national curriculum to be led by educationists Ken Wiltshire and Kevin Donnelly, which was released in 2014.¹² Meanwhile, teachers continued to express concern that the national curriculum was too content heavy and that its pedagogical approach might turn students off the subject. And so the parallel debates continue.¹³

The Australian history wars have been fought over museum exhibits, history texts and national commemorations, and reveal just how politically fractured collective national memory can be. School history is no exception; as a critical site of the history wars, it demonstrates the politicisation of curriculum development, the tense deliberations over content—in particular Indigenous history—and the conflicting beliefs over what young Australians should know about their nation's past. But this is not simply a contest over the national narrative, for the school history wars have been compounded by passionate pedagogical debates over the state of the subject and the practice of

history teaching. These twin concerns of content and method continue to drive discussion over history education in Australia.

Documentation

The politics of public memory have been fiercely debated in Australia, and a number of important works catalogue this heated contest over the past. Keith Windschuttle's claims that academic bias, rather than colonial violence, contributed to the number of Indigenous victims on Australia's frontier sparked the most recent round of the history wars.¹⁴ Robert Manne's edited collection *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*¹⁵ and Bain Attwood's *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History*¹⁶ responded critically to Windschuttle's assertions. *The History Wars* by Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark also examined these debates and attracted significant public discussion.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton's recent study of history in contemporary Australia provides an overview of these debates in curricula, museums, heritage and public commemorations.¹⁸

The methodological concerns of Australian history teaching are also well documented.¹⁹ In 1998, the historian Alan Ryan published an article in the *Bulletin* of the Australian Historical Association titled 'Developing a Strategy to "Save" History', which lamented the decline of the subject in Australian schools.²⁰ Ryan's concern was confirmed by research conducted in the 1990s, such as the survey results published in the Civics Expert Group's report *Whereas the people ... civics and citizenship education*,²¹ which revealed worryingly low levels of national historical knowledge among Australian schoolchildren. While many agreed with Ryan that something drastic had to be done, others defended the subject in schools. In the following two issues of the *Bulletin*, teachers, historians and educationists responded to Ryan's original article, and they provided a lively professional forum about the status of history teaching in Australia that is worth revisiting.²²

So there has been a real struggle—both political and pedagogical—over the way Australian history should be taught in schools. Alan Barcan's lengthy piece, 'History in Decay', was published in *Quadrant* magazine in 1999,²³ and insisted that a retreat from traditional history was irrevocably damaging the subject in schools.²⁴ More recently, Kevin Donnelly's work has also galvanised conservative opinion against progressive forms of history education. His books, *Why Our Schools are Failing* and *Dumbing Down*,²⁵ as well as many newspaper columns, argue for a return to traditional, content-oriented curricula and teaching practices. In response, Anna Clark's qualitative study,

History's Children: History Wars in the Classroom, shows that while students and teachers *do* think Australian history is important, they also insist that it can be critically engaging.²⁶

Conclusion

Schools have been a critical site of the history wars in Australia, generating significant debate over the representation of the 'Australian story' in its syllabuses. Around the country, contest over national memory signals an ongoing anxiety about Australia's national narrative. Then there's the question of *how* it should be told, for history teaching is also an explicitly pedagogical concern: How should history be taught in schools? How do students learn it best? And how can we bring the nation's past into the classroom? These parallel professional and public debates have come together with the national curriculum in recent years as Australians have debated how their national story should be taught in schools.

Notes

1. See, for example: T. Taylor, 'National Curriculum, History and SOSE: An Evidence-Based Perspective', *Teaching History* 42 (2008) 2, 52–55.
2. For two contrasting readings of this history, see: H. Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told? A Personal Search for the Truth About Our History* (Ringwood: Viking, 1998); G. Blainey, 'Drawing up a Balance Sheet of Our History', *Quadrant* 37 (1993) 7–8, 10–15.
3. S. Macintyre and A. Clark, *The History Wars* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003); A. Clark, *Teaching the Nation: Politics and Pedagogy in Australian History* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2006), Chapter 2.
4. J. Howard, 'Prime Minister John Howard's Address to the National Press Club on January 25, 2006', accessed 21 April 2017, <http://theage.com.au/news/national/pms-speech/2006/01/25/1138066849045.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1>.
5. K. Donnelly, 'Why Our Greatest Story is Just not Being Told', *The Australian*, 28 January 2006, 24.
6. J. Albrechtsen, 'Textbook Case of Making Our Past a Blame Game', *The Australian*, 1 February 2006, 14.
7. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'PM Urges History Teaching Overhaul', *7.30 Report*, 26 January 2006, accessed 21 April 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2006/s1556052.htm>.

8. A. Astbury, 'A Lesson in History', *The Age* 6 (2006) February, 16.
9. T. Taylor and C. Young, *Making History: A Guide for the Teaching and Learning of History in Australian Schools* (Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003), 8.
10. J. Bishop, 'Our Classrooms Need to Make a Date with the Facts', *The Australian* 6 (2006) July, 12. The participants at the Summit were: Andrew Barnett, Geoffrey Blainey, Geoffrey Bolton, David Boon, Bob Carr, Inga Clendinnen, Kate Darian-Smith, Nick Ewbank, John Gascoigne, Jenny Gregory, Gerard Henderson, John Hirst, Jackie Huggins, Paul Kelly, Jennifer Lawless, Mark Lopez, Gregory Melleuish, Margo Neale, Geoffrey Partington, Lisa Paul, Peter Stanley, Tom Stannage and Tony Taylor.
11. J. Howard and K. Rudd, 'Transcript of the Leaders Debate, Great Hall, Parliament House, Canberra', 21 October 2007, accessed 1 June 2016, <http://sixtyminutes.ninemsn.com.au/stories/raymartin/307110/60-minutes-presents-the-great-debate-australia-decides-election-07>.
12. K. Donnelly and K. Wiltshire, 'Review of the Australian Curriculum' (Canberra: Australian Government Department of Education, 2014), accessed 21 April 2017, https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/review_of_the_national_curriculum_final_report.pdf.
13. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'New Curriculum 'Blots Out British Heritage'', 1 March 2010, accessed 21 April 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2010/03/01/2833405.htm>; S. Blake, 'Coalition Government to Review Unions and ALP Presence in History Curriculum', 3 September 2013, accessed 1 June 2016, <http://www.news.com.au/national-news/federal-election/coalition-government-to-review-unions-and-alp-presence-in-history-curriculum/story-fnho52ip-1226709301143#ixzz2dyTHev5d>; T. Taylor, 'Pyne Curriculum Review Prefers Analysis-free Myth to History', *The Conversation*, 20 October 2014, accessed 21 April 2014, <http://theconversation.com/pyne-curriculum-review-prefers-analysis-free-myth-to-history-32956>.
14. K. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History. Vol. 1: Van Dieman's Land 1803–1847* (Sydney: Macleay Press, 2002).
15. R. Manne, ed., *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2003).
16. B. Attwood, *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2005).
17. S. Macintyre and A. Clark, *The History Wars*.
18. P. Ashton and P. Hamilton, *History at the Crossroads: Australians and the Past* (Sydney: Halstead Press, 2010).
19. The journals from History Teachers' Associations around Australia, such as *Agora* (Victoria), *Teaching History* (New South Wales), *The History Teacher* (Queensland) and the *Australian History Teacher* from the History Teachers' Association of Australia, have collections that go back to the 1960s and 1970s

and provide an excellent record of the curricular and classroom issues that teachers and historians have engaged with in Australia.

20. A. Ryan, 'Developing a Strategy to "Save" History', *AHA Bulletin* 87 (1998).
21. Civics Expert Group's report, eds., *Whereas the people ... civics and citizenship education* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1994).
22. *AHA Bulletin* 88 and 89 (1999).
23. A. Barcan, 'History in Decay', *Quadrant magazine* 43 (1999) 7–8.
24. Keith Windschuttle had made similar charges in his book: *The Killing of History* (Sydney: Macleay Press, 1994).
25. K. Donnelly, *Why Our Schools are Failing* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 2004); K. Donnelly, *Dumbing Down* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books, 2007).
26. A. Clark, *History's Children: History Wars in the Classroom* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008).

Further Reading

- Ashton, P., and P. Hamilton. *History at the Crossroads: Australians and the Past*. Sydney: Halstead Press, 2010.
- Donnelly, K. *Dumbing Down*. Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books, 2007.
- Ryan, A. 'Developing a Strategy to "Save" History'. *AHA Bulletin* 87 (1998), 39–50.
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- Taylor, T. *National Inquiry Into History Teaching*. Canberra: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000. Accessed 4 June 2016. http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/profiles/school_history.htm.