History under the Southern Cross

Reflections on the future of Australian history

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I find the Eureka flag, especially now it has returned to the site of the stockade, one of the most moving artefacts of Australian history. Hand-stitched and home-made, it is beautiful and fragile. It is also confidently vast, its size declaring its political ambition. It was called, simply, the Australian Flag. And that southern cross of night-time stars is indeed a powerful symbol of a new society dreaming under the canopy of a different sky. ‘Spirit Tree’ is what the Aranda people of central Australia called this constellation wheeling over outback skies, but for the nomadic Christians who arrived in the late eighteenth century it appeared as another kind of spirit tree, one that they called a cross.¹ It quickly became celebrated as ‘the glory of the austral hemisphere’, and we have to remind ourselves that earlier generations of Australians knew the night sky much better than we do.²

You know the story of the flag very well, and there are members of this audience who have done superb work to refine and deepen our appreciation of this sacred artefact. I think especially, and with gratitude, of Anne Beggs Sunter’s dedicated scholarship.³ So let us briefly recall the fate of the flag. Stitched probably by the women of the goldfields … flying briefly on Bakery Hill and above the stockade … salvaged by a trooper … its authenticity later
questioned then confirmed … displayed at the art gallery near the site of the soldiers’ camp … souvenired by admirers like pieces of the true Cross … and, just last year, taken back across town again – from the camp to the stockade – and reverently exhibited where it once flew in defiance. It is now the centrepiece of a museum about ‘people power’ and the nature of Australian democracy. It has its place on the banner of Federation University. It is a fine symbol, I think, of a southern continent that has become a nation, of a quest for a new identity in a strange land, and of a people whose destiny is shaped by their inheritance of a distinct ecology, geography and history. How have people who came to live under the Southern Cross viewed their history here, and how do we see it now, and in the future?

One way that people told the history of History in Australia in the early and mid-twentieth century was to locate it primarily overseas as part of an empire story. Australia was seen as a new, transplanted society with a short and derivative history, a planned, peaceful and successful offshoot of imperial Britain. In this story, history and culture of stature came from abroad. Professional history had its beginnings in the nineteenth century in northern-hemisphere archives and universities and it was a practice that was closely aligned with the rise of the nation state. Therefore proper history began to develop in Australia only in late colonial society and especially in tandem with the consolidation of the new Commonwealth of Australia. The sources of history emphasised in this account came from learned society and from abroad, and they eventually took root in local institutions, especially universities, where there developed a professional interest in the science of the document and the making of nations. Aborigines, as non-literate, non-urban and non-national, could have no ‘history’ and did not constitute a ‘civilisation’ – thus they could find no place in the national polity or the national story. Australian history was seen to reach its academic apotheosis as the subject of the last lecture of a
British History course in a university, and to flower fully only in the mid-twentieth century. This was a story that enabled Manning Clark in 1946 to see himself as embarking on a ‘journey without maps’ and Professor John La Nauze, in 1959, to depict the history of Aboriginal people as a ‘melancholy anthropological footnote’.

An alternative way to give an account of Australian historical consciousness and practice is one that has blossomed in our lifetimes. It begins with the people who lived here for two thousand generations before Europeans arrived and who developed their own forms of history-making and whose civilisation represents an extraordinary achievement in the history of humanity. One is then drawn to seek the roots of settler history in the colonial experience itself, in the newcomers’ intimations of local human antiquity, and in their encounters with those Indigenous peoples and with the strange and wondrous land they inhabited and the canopy of southern stars they apprehended at night. The everyday moral and historical puzzles of modern Australian settlement, according to this interpretation, were inextricable from a contemplation of Aboriginal culture. Early local historians were pioneer storytellers, and because of their attention to found objects, particular places and remembered individuals, were more alert to the Aboriginal past than were academic historians. What kind of history, they wondered, could a settler make in this profoundly Aboriginal place? In the final decades of the twentieth century, when academic history sought to reconnect with these popular forms of history-making, a dynamic chemistry was unleashed. The late academic re-discovery of the Aboriginal past therefore had as much to do with a new scholarly regard for the local and the oral as it did with political and cultural enlightenment. As the practice of history changed, so did the past emerge in a new light.
In this second, revolutionary account of the history of History on this continent, we recognise history as not only a professional, disciplinary practice but also as an everyday and instinctive expression of our humanity. History is a systematic and reflective intellectual discipline with academic traditions and scholarly conventions. But it is also an unending dialogue between the present and the past and thus essential to human consciousness. It is conducted as part of the daily business of living, of knowing oneself and one’s place, of grappling with memory and of finding meaning. Therefore there is a vast spectrum of historical consciousness that includes forms of knowledge both instinctive and learned. The more richly we can integrate these various influences, the better and more thoughtful our scholarship will be.

History is therefore, in my view, best generated with a keen sense of place and community. Here in Ballarat – in a regional city with a tradition of national consciousness, in a society forged by democratic ardour, in a landscape visibly shaped by the economy and ecology of the earth, in a community where popular and scholarly histories energetically intertwine, in a university that is itself a federation of regional identities – here, and in Gippsland and the Wimmera, you are well poised to make a truly creative and innovative contribution to the future of Australian history. Living and working here gives you privileged opportunities to complicate and enrich the continental, national story with social, environmental and regional diversity, and to dissolve the barriers between the academy and the broader community and between scholars and practitioners. Here you can advocate history as the highest of arts and the most demanding of scholarly pursuits, and also as an everyday search for meaning for which there is an insatiable personal and public hunger.

When we disentangle the history of History from professional and disciplinary preoccupations, we are free to recognise how closely history haunts experience.
It didn’t need to be imported; it was organic; it was there at the beginning. As impromptu storytelling, as desperate justification, as an expression of hope, as a search for meaning, it arises spontaneously out of experience, memory and aspiration. The Eureka flag was stitched, surely, with a tremulous sense of history. One of the most compelling commemorations of the rebellion was that of Raffaello Carboni who returned to the site of the stockade a year afterwards and ‘from the rising to the setting of the sun’ gave a reading of his history published only two days before. The violence and tragedy of the stockade was instantly the subject of history – remembered, retold and argued over from dawn on Sunday the 3rd of December. Its historical symbolism – its place in an evolving story of western political tradition – was immediately a vital and practical matter of personal and political fortunes. The legend began to be made in that bitter, early morning light 160 years ago and has continued evolving ever since. The present, to which we pay so much lip service, is only ever an ephemeral conciliation of past and future. The present is always caught in the act, it is always in the process of becoming, sometimes consciously and precipitately so.

Often we historians are asked why we are interested in the past – the past that is gone. My answer is that the past is all we have. The present is but a breath, and the future doesn’t exist except as a projection of the past. The past is all we have – the full sum of human experience is all we have – on which to base our hopes and plans, and from which to draw our conversations, ideas and stories. The empirical, reflective, holistic, scholarly study of that body of knowledge, of change over time, of how the past is in the present and the future, is vital to our humanity. The great historian and anthropologist, Greg Dening, once wrote that ‘Human beings are history-makers. Of all the systems that are expressions of who a people are, the sharpest and clearest is their historical consciousness.’
Ballarat was the site of one of Australia’s earliest historical societies, formed in 1896. At their first meeting, several members boasted of the relics they had hoarded. Mr John Noble Wilson declared that he had an Aboriginal skull among his possessions. It was not unusual, at that time, for a renowned collector to make such a boast. But what was the reaction of the gathering when Dr Joseph Francis Usher of the Ballarat District Hospital stood up and claimed to have in his collection ‘the skull of an old pioneer’? Which pioneer, I wonder, and which Aboriginal? History must deal with the skeletons in the cupboard.

When I was beginning my work as a historian in the 1980s I was lucky to be employed by the State Library of Victoria as Field Officer, which involved the acquisition of historic manuscripts and pictures for the library’s Australiana research collections. It was known as ‘the cup of tea job’ for it took one into the lounge rooms of Victoria to discuss the future of family papers and the likely public uses of personal pasts. I was especially fortunate to be guided in that work by the wonderful Centre for Gippsland Studies, which pioneered academic and community partnerships in regional history and which I am delighted to see is part of your university’s ‘federation’. On one occasion when I was working in Central Victoria – I remember it was a cold October day and it started to snow as I entered Ballarat – I had cause to visit the Ballarat City Council. When I was talking with one of the council officers, he went to get some papers from a cupboard by his desk and when he opened the cupboard door, I was shocked to see Bob Hawke inside. Well, it was Bob Hawke’s head, actually – indeed, it was a bust of the Prime Minister – quite a feisty portrait recently completed by Peter Nicholson and about to be installed in the Prime Ministers’ Avenue in the Ballarat Botanical Gardens. I shouldn’t have been surprised. I now know that one often opens a cupboard of Ballarat history to find, if not a skeleton, then a national figure or a national story inside.
Ballarat has always had a very keen and active historical consciousness, and so is the perfect place to launch a Collaborative Research Centre in Australian History. Perhaps this rich dimension of your cultural life comes from being the birthplace of a national legend. As Weston Bate wrote of Eureka in his wonderful and enduring book, *Lucky City*, ‘[t]he release of pent-up radical energies gave a whole generation at Ballarat a sense of national purpose’.

People here had no doubt that their golden city was national and imperial as well as local. And so Ballarat quickly became the first city in Australia to possess a genuine history, when W B Withers’ remarkable *History of Ballarat* was precociously published in 1870. And as the federation of the Commonwealth was brewing in those final years of the nineteenth century, Ballarat proved itself an ardent federal city, and touted itself even as a possible federal capital. Ballarat residents, after all, had invented ‘the Australian Flag’ and they remained keen to ‘lay claim to the title of Australians’. There is such a strong history of civic aspiration here.

When that early historical society formed here in 1896, it called itself, of course, the *Australian* Historical Records Society. As well as collecting documents and memories of the gold days, its members worked with the Australian Natives Association in memorialising a local Aboriginal man, known as ‘King Billy’ or Frank, who died in 1896. As Janice Newton has investigated, the Society identified and mourned Frank, as was typical of the period, as ‘the last of his race’, and built a memorial in the Ballarat cemetery. The gold immigrants, as well as celebrating their own achievements, were slowly beginning to realise that becoming Australian meant coming to some accommodation with Indigenous peoples. In recent decades the same monument became a site for affirming Aboriginal survival. That revolution in sensibility and understanding is one I will elaborate in a moment.
I want now to think through some of the historiographical revolutions that we have experienced in Australia in the last half-century, all of which are still unfolding around us and affecting the way we see and write Australian history now and in the future. We will be talking about them together later this morning and so I really just want to start the conversation. Let me be prompted by that Ballarat monument to King Billy to reflect that the greatest change in Australian history in my lifetime concerns Aboriginal history. When I was born in the late 1950s, some scholarly Australians were still arguing that Aboriginal people had been in this continent for just a few thousand years, and some asserted an even briefer presence. There was also an assumption that Aboriginal culture had been unchanging and its environmental impact minimal. Australia has a settler history of resistance to the intimations of Aboriginal antiquity and adaptability. There was reluctance among colonists to acknowledge the depth of belonging of a people whose continent they had usurped. Therefore, broad understanding of the human antiquity of Australia, always deeply known to Aboriginal people themselves, has been a relatively recent and dramatic event that had to await the twin revolutions of professional archaeology and radiocarbon dating, both of which emerged in local practice in the 1950s and 1960s. ‘No segment of the history of Homo sapiens’, wrote archaeologist John Mulvaney, ‘had been so escalated since Darwin took time off the Mosaic standard.’ Since the 1960s, archaeological dates for human occupation in Australia have deepened from 13,000 years before the present (at Kenniff Cave in Queensland in 1962) to over 40,000 years at several sites by the 1980s and a likely 50-55,000 years in Arnhem Land.12

This dating revolution linked Australia’s human story to the Pleistocene era and to the environmental challenge of the last ice age. Thus the continent could no longer be seen as ‘the last of lands’ to be colonised by humans. Instead, the
voyage to Sahul – as the greater continent of ice-age Australia and New Guinea is called – was humanity’s first deep ocean crossing. But it was to be Australia’s land – the complex ecological reality of its creatures, soils and climate – that would distinguish it as much as any sea barrier. Over tens of thousands of years, Australians developed a distinctive regional style of hunter-gatherer society. In 1969, when archaeologist Rhys Jones coined the term ‘fire-stick farming’ to describe Aboriginal land management, he was deliberately provocative in applying the word ‘farming’ to a people allegedly ‘without agriculture’. Different environmental pressures on the Australian continent led to a very different – and, to Europeans, an unrecognisable – type of farming. Aboriginal culture, it emerged, was innovative as well as ancient. Australia was the site of the world’s oldest cremation; perhaps some of the earliest human art; the first watercraft to cross open ocean; the first evidence of edge-ground axes; an early domesticated species in the dingo; millstones that pre-date agricultural revolutions elsewhere; and some of the most ancient physical remains of modern humans.¹³

As archaeologists began to sketch a deep history of humans under the Southern Cross, historians began to look again at the character of the modern Australian frontier and to write the cross-cultural history of their country. In the 1970s a new journal called Aboriginal History was founded and writers such as Henry Reynolds, Judith Wright, Diane Barwick and Ian Clark began to investigate Aboriginal historical perspectives and experience. In books such as Reynolds’ The Other Side of the Frontier and Wright’s The Cry for the Dead, both published in 1981, Australians were given the image of Aboriginal people sitting in their own country and discussing ‘the European problem’. Of course, it is worth remembering that the writer Eleanor Dark had made this imaginative leap into the Indigenous world view 40 years earlier, in her great novel The Timeless Land, published in 1941 – a book which I would suggest was possibly
the most influential work of Australian history in the twentieth century. Yes, it was a novel, but it was faithful to the historical sources and meticulously researched and referenced, as Eleanor Dark’s notebooks show. So much so that an early version of her Preface began: ‘This book has borrowed so much from history that it seems advisable to remind readers that it is fiction.’

History and fiction are an intriguing literary tag-team, often working in tandem and taking turns to lead us into new territory.

The 1970s also saw the rise of social history, and of what was called ‘history from below’. The British historian, E P Thompson, and his book *The Making of the English Working Class* was an inspiration, as was the British socialist journal, *History Workshop*. Ethnographic history – championed in Australia by Greg Dening, Inga Clendinnen, Rhys Isaac and Donna Merwick – also emerged as an influential model with its combination of anthropology and history, its attention to lived experience, its focus on encounters and episodes, and its elegant integration of narrative and structure. We can see the Australian bicentennial ‘slice’ histories of the 1980s, especially the 1838 and 1888 volumes and the subsequent work of Alan Atkinson, as substantial examples of the influence of the ethnographic method on Australian history. In the same period – the 1970s and 80s – feminist politics brought the experience and perspectives of women in both public and private life into the centre of the writing and research of Australian history. Feminism did more than sensitise historians to the agency and distinctive experience of women; it did more than add subject-matter to the substance of history. In the words of the American historian Joan Scott, it also forced ‘a critical re-examination of the premises and standards of existing historical work’. And it did this by developing gender as a category of historical analysis and by challenging us to pay attention to women and men as gendered beings. Masculinity as well as femininity came under closer historical study, and this change of focus brought analysis also of
the history of sexuality and of sexual politics, of family life, children and
domesticity, and a more seamless interrogation of public and private culture.
The exciting ‘biographical turn’ in historical scholarship – exemplified by Rani
Kerin’s writing – responds to this renewed interest in subjectivity.16 Three
examples of the way this range of work is changing our histories of the
goldfields are: from the 1980s, Pat Grimshaw, Chris McConville, Ellen
McEwen and Charles Fahey on family, community and demography in colonial
Australia; from the 1990s, David Goodman’s ethnographic and intellectual
history of the gold rushes to Victoria and California, entitled Gold Seeking; and
from just this last year, Clare Wright’s Stella Prize-winning, feisty and stylish
history of women, men and families on the goldfields, The Forgotten Rebels of
Eureka.17

While the writing of history was changing, Australia was also changing – fast.
This is what is so captivating about our craft of history. Because it is a dialogue
between the ever-evolving present and the elusive past, it is constantly creative
and surprising. Post-war immigration swiftly transformed British Australia.
The 23 million people who live here now are very different to the 7 million
Australians of 1945 and the one million of 1788. What kind of history of this
country are our newest immigrants looking for? They probably seek histories
that try to understand Australia’s place in its region and its responsibilities as
part of a global community, histories that tell of earlier immigrants and the land
and peoples they found here, and histories that reveal the capacity of Australian
society for either inflexibility or resilience. What potential for prejudice and
tolerance does our history afford? How have Australians managed religious and
ethnic diversity in the past? What is the history of our attitudes to refugees?18
This is a vital and growing field of Australian history. To quote Klaus
Neumann, one of our historians of refugees and asylum-seekers, history is not
only about understanding the present, it can also ‘prompt us not to take the
present for granted.'19 History can respect the integrity of the past at the same
time as aspire to change the world, because stories determine the way we think
and behave.

An enquiry into multicultural Australia, past and present, is fittingly generated
from a city born in a nineteenth-century gold rush, that international
demographic event historian Eric Richards called ‘this anarchy of
immigration’.20 The diggings were a famous melting pot; at least 17
nationalities were represented behind the stockade. People from southern China
were the largest non-English speaking minority group on the Mount Alexander
diggings, constituting about one quarter of the adult male population, and
thanks to work by Keir Reeves and others, we are discovering now how
different Australian goldfields history looked from a Chinese perspective.21 But
we have also come to understand that the term ‘British’ disguises much
diversity: my own forebears lived in a Welsh mining community at Maldon and
my great-grandfather, who was born in Australia and played among gum trees
and mullock heaps in the 1860s, did not learn to speak English until he went to
school. That extraordinary, instant, international community of the goldfields,
reliant on a mining economy, looks more familiar to us today than it did to
Australians a century ago.

With the rise of ecological consciousness since the 1960s, environmental
history has also changed the Australian story. Those well-worn metaphors that
arose from the settler’s encounter with a strange land – of a ‘land of
contrarieties’, of ‘droughts and flooding rains’ and of ‘upside-down nature’ –
have, with an ecological perspective, been given new life and dignity. Now,
instead of being a mere artefact of settler sensibility, the wide, brown land is
also explicable as an ancient craton, a low-energy ecosystem, a boom-and-bust
ecology and an El Niño continent. The biological cringe about our
'monotonous gums’, ‘songless birds’ and ‘fossil animals’ has been replaced by a deep historical narrative about the continent’s Gondwanan inheritance, its long, isolated voyage north into drier latitudes and its embrace by fire. The cultural disdain with which colonists noticed that native flora and fauna generally gave way to imported exotics has become cultural pride in the evolutionary sophistication and fragility of a long-isolated biota. We now understand that it is actually Europe that is the ‘new world’, colonised by opportunistic weeds after the ending of the last ice age. Modern Australian history is like a giant experiment in ecological crisis and management, sometimes a horrifying concentration of environmental damage and cultural loss, and sometimes a heartening parable of hope and learning. Ecologists working in Australia today often feel like they are ambulance drivers arriving at the scene of an accident. Such a roller-coaster of environmental history makes Australians think differently and more sharply than the rest of the world on many ecological matters. We will need to write histories that, in the words of fire historian Stephen Pyne, ‘are the intellectual equivalent of ecological regeneration’. On such a continent, we can never blithely assume the dominance of culture over nature, nor can we believe in the infinite resilience of the land. We are committed by history and circumstance to an intellectually innovative environmental enquiry.

As evidence that the field of environmental history has reached a rich maturity in Australia, let me point to two recent, brilliant books that are environmental histories without needing to declare it: Grace Karskens’ *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney* (2009) and James Boyce’s *Van Diemen’s Land* (2008) seamlessly integrate Indigenous history, environmental history and colonial history in subtle and compelling foundational narratives. The National Museum of Australia aims to achieve the same integration. The environmental and material legacy of the Australian goldfields as a cultural landscape of world
significance has also fostered much thoughtful and important historical work in recent years.\textsuperscript{28}

The foundation story of modern Australia now seems to me to be one of the most moving and challenging histories with which a people might be destined to grapple. It turns out that Australian history is as much about ecological, social and technological disjunctions as it is about the political stability and continuity for which settlers first celebrated it. We don’t need to turn to Anzac Day and the commemoration of an overseas war for our defining moment of national drama and solemnity. Consider that in 1788, peoples with immensely long and intimate histories of habitation encountered the furthest-flung representatives of the world’s most industrialised nation. A First Fleet that was really called that – its ships carefully stowed with seeds and a ballast of convict settlers – initiated one of the most self-conscious and carefully recorded colonisations in history, on the shores of a land that was beautiful, baffling and like no other. This ‘new’ land was actually the most ancient, and the true ‘nomads’ were the colonisers. It was both an invasion and an awesome social experiment; there was dancing with strangers and there was war. On our beaches and across the continent ever since, there began to unfold ‘one of the major discontinuities in the course of life on this planet’, as has been declared of the Americas in 1492 by Alfred Crosby.\textsuperscript{29} But Australia was even more unfamiliar to Europeans than America, which had once shared a land-bridge with Eurasia and still bore the marks of it. We who have inherited this land are still discovering its secrets and coming to terms with its past.

The American writer William Faulkner famously said that ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past.’ It’s a simple, powerful quote, declaring what we know to be true, that the past is never gone or left behind; we are never free of either its burden or its inspiration. Since we can’t disentangle ourselves from its
power, we might as well wrestle with it intelligently. It is a quarry of ideas, an archive of possible future scenarios. As we are propelled into the mid-twenty-first century, the global melting pot of the nineteenth century looks more fascinating. Some of those broader, more diverse nineteenth-century political definitions of the Australian community – such as that of ‘Australasia’ – were ‘disremembered’ at the time of federation, as the new Commonwealth retreated to its definition as ‘a continent for a nation’ and turned its back on Asia and the Pacific in its quest for a ‘white’ population. This ‘isolation of Australian history’, as the Pacific historian Donald Denoon aptly called, increased in the decades of post-war decolonisation as the comparative framework of British imperial history crumbled. Australian history, in those middle decades of the twentieth century, was active and exciting but nationalist and isolationist, and thus relatively neglected by the rest of the world. This neglect, wrote Denoon in 1986, ‘seems a terrible pity, since [Australian scholarship] offers arresting insights to non-Australians precisely because it is so difficult to locate in the context of conventional categories of experience’; he urged the development of historical approaches that would ‘restore Australian experience to the rest of the world … [and] reintegrate Australia into the history of humanity’. I think that challenge has been energetically taken up by our generation and we are now forging those links through the kinds of new histories I have been discussing – by exploring Australia’s deep human past, its settler frontier, its multicultural diversity, its environmental predicament and its geopolitical destiny. History has emerged as a powerful tool in helping Australians to reimagine their island-continent nation as both a constellation of smaller bioregional identities and as a site of larger transnational social and economic networks. The modern craft of history was shaped by nationalism, yet in the twenty-first century world we will have to move decisively beyond those origins as we search for histories and stories that find human commonality beyond nation or race or ethnicity.
Thus we have the rise of transnational history, world history, global history and of ‘Big History’, a term used by the Australian historian David Christian to describe histories of the universe and of life on earth since the Big Bang. There is an interesting predominance of Australians among intellectuals teaching and writing Big History and I think it is because being Australian means integrating deep time and social history, geological and human timescales, to an unusual degree. The global climate crisis has made a nonsense of the boundary between nature and culture. Industrialisation has initiated a new geological era that historians like to call ‘the Anthropocene’, which is characterised by pervasive human influence on Earth processes. It is both awful and awe-inspiring that we are right now living through the very years that see us crossing a threshold of geological eras. Understanding anthropogenic climate change urgently requires deep-time historical analyses, century-scale histories of science and philosophy, and studies of human and social resilience from both the ancient past and the unfolding present. We need meaningful histories that enable us to see our own fossil-fuel society in proper perspective, and to see ourselves not just as a civilisation but as a species.

Humanists have been as important as scientists in delivering these crucial insights. One thing that a detailed scholarly history of the last one thousand years tells us is that average global temperature needs to shift only a small amount to have cataclysmic social and political effects. The Medieval Warm Period, which lasted from about 900 to 1300 and the Little Ice Age, which began about 1300 and finished in the nineteenth century, were fluctuations of average global temperature of about 1˚ Celsius. They were tiny compared with the great swings of temperature during the Pleistocene and those that we now face in the coming century – but even those relatively small fluctuations of the last thousand years had very significant effects on human geography and
society. Australian history will, I believe, contribute to world history and politics on these issues in at least two ways. First, the story of modern Australia, with its embattled agricultural economy and boom and bust ecology, reveals a society and nature that is especially vulnerable to climate change. And second, Australia’s deep human history delivers an inspiring parable about human survival during the massive temperature and se-level changes of the last ice age. Archaeologist, Mike Smith, explores this rich history in a new book published last year, The Archaeology of Australia’s Deserts. Although Smith helped to establish some of our oldest dates of human occupation, he believes that a nuanced narrative of cultural change through millennia ultimately conveys depth better than dates. Therefore, in The Archaeology of Australia’s Deserts, Mike Smith works from the ancient past forwards and also from the ethnographic and historical present backwards. This is a new kind of history of Australia emerging. I think there is a coming of age of a settler nation in being able to say that a new book in archaeology is, quite simply, a landmark work in Australian history.

It is a great privilege and honour to be invited to join you today, as you celebrate and discuss your new and brilliant initiative in research and writing about the history of our country. I know that you will agree that there is a great advantage in launching such an enterprise from a proud regional city with a rich national and federal history. The kind of partnerships that make history vital can really work meaningfully here – partnerships between the academy and the community, between scholarship and industry. Public history – which draws its energy and scholarly vigour from taking seriously the interface between historians and the community – has been a source of much of the originality of Australian history in recent decades, and you have done it very well here, and this new Centre will further strengthen your edge. And a community born in
one of the great nineteenth-century movements of people across the world is also the right place to think what history looks like beyond nationalism.

When W B Withers wrote his *History of Ballarat* in 1870 and looked back at the less than 20 years that had transformed his city, which he called ‘this mighty creation’ and ‘one of the wonders of this century’, he foreshadowed Eleanor Dark’s comments when he declared Ballarat’s astonishing story to be ‘stranger than fiction’. And that is indeed the nature of truth. It requires the best scholarship to make it believable. Withers interviewed aging pioneers and he walked the streets and countryside looking for clues; he hoped, as he put it, ‘to gather some of the honey of fact from fugitive opportunity, that it might be garnered for the historian of the future’. Withers reminds us that this is another role that all of us interested in the future of Australian history should play – we are historians of our own time, we are thoughtful witnesses of events that are unfolding before our eyes, and every day of our lives we should seek to gather the honey of fact from fugitive opportunity so that future Australians will be enriched. I wish you every success with your new and exciting Centre!
ENDNOTES

5 This paragraph summarises an argument in Hunters and Collectors: The antiquarian imagination in Australia, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996.
8 Weston Bate, Lucky City: The First Generation at Ballarat, 1851-1901, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1978, p. 73.
9 Bate, Lucky City, p. 251.
10 Bate, Lucky City, p. 191.
14 Eleanor Dark, Rough typescript copy of ‘The Timeless Land’ in her papers, MLMSS 4545, Box 5, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.
19 Neumann, ‘Seeking asylum in Australia: A historical perspective’, pp. 73-84.
20 Eric Richards, Destination Australia: Migration to Australia since 1901, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2008, p. 2.
The scientific and literary contributions of the Australian zoologist and palaeontologist, Tim Flannery, have been very influential, especially in The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People, Reed Books, Sydney, 1994. See also Libby Robin, How a Continent Created a Nation, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2007.

Steve Morton (then of CSIRO Wildlife and Ecology), address to a workshop on ‘Environmental History in the National Museum of Australia’, jointly sponsored by the Museum and the History Program, Research School of Social Sciences, ANU, 14 April, 1999.


I have further explored the development of the field of environmental history in ‘Seeing the forest and the trees’, in Anna Clark and Paul Ashton (eds), Rethinking Australian History, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2013.


See, for example, Keir Reeves and David Nichols, Deeper Leads: New Approaches to Victorian goldfields history, Ballarat Heritage Services (BHS), Ballarat, 2007; Susan Lawrence, Dolly’s Creek: An archaeology of a Victorian goldfields community, MUP, Melbourne, 2000; Alan Mayne, Hill End: An historic Australian goldfields landscape, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003; and Barry McGowan, Dust and Dreams: Mining communities in south-east NSW, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2010.


Griffiths, ‘A Humanist on Thin Ice’.
