

**Broadsheets and Broadcasts:
History in the Australian Media**

The 'Australians and the Past' survey of historical consciousness at the end of the twentieth century showed that the vast majority of Australians gained their principal historical understanding from some form of entertainment across their lifetime. One of the most common activities – for 84.2 per cent of respondents – was watching historical movies or documentaries on television. The 'media', including newspapers and radio programs, was recorded as a source for history, and the survey suggested that newspaper articles and scrapbooks were collected by people who were researching history.¹

Historical features have been appearing in the Australian press since at least the 1850s. Journalists have written local histories, state histories and biographies, as Prue Torney-Parlicki showed in an important piece on the Australian journalist as historian;² they have authored contemporaneous histories, particularly as foreign and war correspondents; and several played key roles in the establishment of historical societies. The Australian Broadcasting Commission (later Corporation) and commercial radio created a new outlet for historians, and television further entrenched the role of the public historian/intellectual. The Australian media has also spawned historical fiction and period films, series and mini-series made for television. The twentieth century closed with particular media outlets inveigled in the 'history wars', and the dawn of the twenty-first century saw the production of reality television or 'living history' shows.³ Tonight I am

¹ Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton, 'At home with the past: Initial findings from the survey', *Australian Cultural History*, no. 23, 2003, pp. 7, 9, 11, 13, 15-16, 26, 28.

² Prue Torney-Parlicki, 'The Australian journalist as historian', in *Journalism: Print, Politics and Popular Culture*, eds Ann Curthoys and Julianne Schultz, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1999, pp. 245-58, 315-18.

³ Michelle Arrow, "'That history should not have been how it was": *The Colony, Outback House*, and Australian history', *Film and History*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2007, pp. 54-66.

going to briefly explore some of the many ways in which history has been presented by the Australian media, particularly radio, since the 1920s.

Applying for a broadcasting licence in 1926 for what became 2GB, the Theosophical Society's A. E. Bennett wrote: 'The intention is to conduct the station on ideal principles and solely with the object of uplifting our Australian people'. Amidst classical music and lectures of 'high standing' would be talks 'on the great men of history ... with the Object of developing in our Australian Nation a high culture similar to that of the older countries of the world but with our purely national characteristics'.⁴ Exemplary figures from the past⁵ were to become frequent subjects of talks on the new medium of radio. Biographical subjects were generally classical, British or European, and targeted more at male interests. When, in 1934, a new 2GB announcer, John Creighton, began presenting 'topical and historic' sketches, under the general title of *Glimpses of the Great*, he explained that they would be broadcast at 3.45pm weekdays, 'the time when most women are taking a rest'.⁶ Later, commercial stations included in their daytime programming aimed at women talks on female historical figures. 2UW was presenting a *Women in History* series by 1945; a sample from March shows talks on Queen Zenobia; the Duchess of Gordon; Elizabeth Farren, an eighteenth century actress; and Nino de Lenclos, a French beauty.⁷

Australian history gradually made its way onto the airwaves. In 1931 there was a talk on 2FC (soon to become part of the new ABC) about the Lambing Flat riots.⁸ Sydney's Catholic station 2SM was particularly bold in its programming. On 8 August

⁴ National Archives of Australia (NAA)/Victoria: MP522/1, 2GB, Main File, letter from A. E. Bennett to Chief Manager, Telegraph & Wireless, 7 April 1926.

⁵ Stuart Macintyre, *History for a Nation: Ernest Scott and the Making of Australian History*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 36.

⁶ *Wireless Weekly (WW)*, 18 May 1934, p. 8.

⁷ *Radio Pictorial of Australia (RPA)*, 1 March 1945, p. 6.

⁸ *WW*, 13 February 1931, p. 10.

1934 it seems to have broadcast some sort of re-enactment of Governor Arthur Phillip's explorations of March-April 1788. By 1936 2SM was broadcasting *Tapestries of Life* at 9pm on Mondays, featuring characters such as John Macarthur, 'The Knight of the Golden Fleece'.⁹ In 1943 2CH presented every Tuesday and Wednesday night *Australian Cavalcade*, a drama produced by Edward Howell for AWA ranging from the settlement of the Australian colony to the landing at Gallipoli.¹⁰

Some more contemporary world history was also dramatised on the commercial airwaves. In 1942 *March of Time*, produced by R. C. Hickling for 3DB and relayed interstate, celebrated its 300th episode; the first had apparently served as a prologue to the Spanish Civil War.¹¹ Whether about recent or more distant developments and figures, history broadcasts could be vulnerable to accusations of impropriety, particularly during current times of strife. In 1948 a dentist complained to the Postmaster-General about a play on 3UZ which included details of Lady Hamilton's 'intimate relations with Lord Nelson': 'Recent world events have shown signs of the Empire breaking up & we do not want sordid history to hasten its collapse', huffed the dentist.¹² As late as 1965, the secretary of the Women's Christian Temperance Union's Queensland branch, Mrs M. C. Wadsworth, was advising the Australian Broadcasting Control Board that 'the true function of television and radio is to help us raise a generation with strength of character and courageous leadership'; consequently, broadcasting stations should include sessions featuring 'great examples from the Bible, and from history, biography and literature'.¹³

As we saw with John Creighton at 2GB, some history talks were presented by professional radio announcers. But academics historians also belonged to the group,

⁹ *WW*, 3 August 1934, p. 7; 14 August 1936, p. 43.

¹⁰ *RPA*, 1 January 1943, p. 19.

¹¹ *RPA*, 1 February 1942, p. 7.

¹² NAA/Victoria: MP1170/1, 3UZ/20 PART 1, letter from ? Philpots, to PMG Cameron, 31 May 1948.

¹³ NAA/Western Australia: K308, WP/1/19 PART 1, ABCB Agendum, 1 June 1965.

generally known as ‘news commentators’, who were a distinctive feature of the Australian airwaves from the late 1920s. Although *Wireless Weekly* remarked in 1936 that ‘playful professor[s]’ were ‘pleased to be let off the academic chain’, it criticised their talks for being boring and smug; this inspired a listener to write in defending as engaging the talks of G. V. Portus, a pioneer of adult education and professor of politics and history at the University of Adelaide.¹⁴

Ernest Scott, professor of history at the University of Melbourne from 1913 until his death in 1939, was today what would be called a public historian or intellectual, with his voice carrying into schools, the press and public discourse. Originally a journalist, Scott became during World War I a conspicuously contemporary historian, endeavouring in his writings and his teachings to discern the contemporary in the historical. Although he tried to insist that daily newspapers could not be ‘dignified with the name of History’, there is a sense in which the divide between his own historical work and his ongoing journalistic writings began to narrow.¹⁵ He was one of a group of individuals from respectable Melbourne who petitioned the new UAP government in 1931 to organise broadcasting upon an independent basis; the ABC came into being a year later.¹⁶

S. H. Roberts, from 1929 second Challis professor of history at the University of Sydney, was also a frequent newspaper and radio commentator. Increasingly he expanded his interest in international history into international affairs. He presented *Notes on the News* for the ABC from 1932 and, having published the runaway bestseller *The House that Hitler Built* in 1936, wrote frequently on foreign affairs for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, sounding loud and early warnings about Nazi Germany’s ultimate intentions. During the war, as ‘Our Own International Correspondent’, he wrote almost daily

¹⁴ *WW*, 7 February 1936, p. 14; 21 February 1936, p. 15.

¹⁵ Macintyre, *History for a Nation*, pp. 80, 172-4.

¹⁶ K.S. Inglis, *This is the ABC: The Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1932-1983*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1983, p. 17.

columns for the *SMH* analysing the pattern of the Allied war effort, as well as weekly columns under his own name. It is notable that after his Hitler study he undertook no further scholarly writing, with his role as pundit taking over from that of professor.¹⁷ In an address to the New South Wales Country Press Association in 1950, Roberts advocated the establishment of a Diploma of Journalism, declaring that ‘we have left the ivory tower’.¹⁸ Max Crawford also lectured on the ABC in the 1930s, and Brian Fitzpatrick was heard regularly on 3XY and the ABC in the 1940s and 1950s, although probably more in his capacity as a civil libertarian than as a historian.¹⁹

Like other Australian ‘experts’, historians were surely grateful for the opportunity to disseminate to a wider audience the insights and opinions gleaned from their research. Contributing to the media also served to augment their salaries, although how profitable radio broadcasts were is somewhat unclear. When Portus broadcast first on a commercial station in 1929, he was surprised to learn that no fee would be offered, and tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade the manager that academics were professionals, just like musicians.²⁰ Ernest Scott found churning out signed book reviews and unsigned editorials for the *Argus* and the *Australasian* at 3 guineas (£3 pounds, 3 shillings) a piece more lucrative than contributing to fledgling radio stations; when a station offered him £1 for each appearance on air, he threw the letter into the wastepaper basket.²¹ Roberts, however, made considerable additional income from his public writings and broadcasts.²²

¹⁷ Deryck Schreuder, ‘An unconventional founder: Stephen Roberts and the professionalisation of the historical discipline’, in *The Discovery of Australian History, 1890-1939*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1995, pp. 132, 143, and S. H. ROBERTS, *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)*, vol. 16; Gavin Souter, *Company of Herald*, MUP, Melbourne, 1981, p. 170.

¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, 18 October 1950, p. 5.

¹⁹ Robert Dare, ‘Max Crawford and the study of history’, in *The Discovery of Australian History*, p. 179; Geoffrey Serle, Brian FITZPATRICK, *ADB*, vol. 14.

²⁰ G.V. Portus, *Happy Highways*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1953, pp. 243-4.

²¹ Macintyre, *History for a Nation*, pp. 145-6.

²² Schreuder, ‘An unconventional founder’, p. 133.

Other individuals with training in history found places at the ABC. B. H. Molesworth, a lecturer in economic history at the University of Queensland, became Controller of Talks in 1937. Rohan Rivett, a young history graduate, wrote news bulletins for the ABC's shortwave service during the war.²³ And then there was Frank Clune, a journalist and prolific author of popular histories (many of them written by P. R. Stephensen), whose *Roaming Round Australia* series on the ABC from 1945 to 1957 boasted an audience of one million.²⁴

If it was Australia's official World War I correspondent, C. E. W. Bean, who did most to create and maintain the Anzac legend in his journalism and books from April 1915 onwards, the broadcast media also played a role in the memorialisation of Anzac Day. Just weeks after the landing at Anzac Cove a re-enactment was staged at Tamarama for Alfred Rolfe's film, *The Hero of the Dardanelles*; in 1928 the footage, which many people thought was real, was used in another film, *The Spirit of Gallipoli*.²⁵ During World War II, Anzac Day was invoked to boost morale. In April 1942 the ABC invited Bean himself to mark the anniversary by speaking on 'That Anzac Day and This'; in April 1943 Dr H. V. Evatt, the Attorney-General and Minister for External Affairs, used a broadcast to declare that Anzac Day demonstrated that 'we cannot rest'.²⁶ In 1946 Frank Grose, better known to 2GB listeners as 'Uncle Frank', began covering the dawn service for the ABC and its shortwave service, as well as a relay of commercial stations; he would continue to do so for the next 40 years.²⁷ When the feminist and peace activist

²³ Inglis, *This is the ABC*, pp. 57, 80, 191.

²⁴ Julian Croft, Frank CLUNE, *ADB*, vol. 13.

²⁵ *SMH*, 12 June 2004.

²⁶ Inglis, *This is the ABC*, p. 99; *SMH*, 27 April 1943, p. 4a.

²⁷ State Library of NSW: ML MSS 3261, Frank Grose Papers, Box 1, Minutes of meetings of 2GB Community Chest, 1945-1949, The Anzac Dawn Ceremony of Remembrance Program, 25 April 1946; Minutes of meeting of Radio Community Chest, 11 May 1962; Synopsis of activities contained in annual report for year ended 30 June 1965.

Irene Greenwood introduced a new program, *Woman to Woman*, to 6PM and 6AM Northam in April 1948, one of her first broadcasts concerned Anzac Day services.²⁸

Paula Hamilton has studied the *Daily Mirror*'s historical feature, which began in 1945 as a more extended item than general news, usually related to the war. She found that each subject was woven into a racy dramatic story which had to have an 'angle'; when a major political or sporting figure, or an eccentric, died, the editor tried to organise an historical feature on their life; and, perhaps most importantly, that the feature had a much closer relationship to histories produced by the academy than she had at first suspected. The volume of Australian material, Hamilton also noted, gradually increased from the 1960s.²⁹ In 1968 the newspaper reproduced pages of the *London Gazette* documenting Captain Cook's voyages; in the lead-up to Australia Day, 1969, the *Daily Mirror* published the names of 1000 convicts from the First Fleet, as well as supplements printed in the style and prose of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³⁰ The regular historical feature lives on in the *Daily Telegraph*, the newspaper with which the *Mirror* was merged in 1990, and now includes an 'On This Day' column.³¹ This sense of functionalism carries on to radio, too, with the past neatly packaged in features such as the 3-minute *It Happened This Day* spot produced by Fairfax Radio Syndication.³²

Television historical drama in Australia began in the early 1960s with the ABC's series *Stormy Petrel* (1960), *The Outcasts* (1961) and *The Patriots* (1962). They were set

²⁸ Murdoch University Library: Irene Greenwood Collection, Box 9, untitled program schedule for *Woman to Woman*, 26-29 April 1948.

²⁹ Paula Hamilton, "Stranger than fiction": The *Daily Mirror* 'Historical Feature', in *Packaging the Past: Public Histories*, eds John Rickard and Peter Spearritt, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1991, pp. 198-207; *Pages of History: The Best of the Daily Telegraph Mirror Historical Feature 1945-1995*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 1995.

³⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 17-21 January 1969.

³¹ Hamilton, "Stranger than fiction", p. 205.

³² <http://www.fxrs.com.au/Programming-And-Services/Features/It-Happened-Today.aspx>

in early colonial Australia and aimed at a high level of historical accuracy.³³ ABC radio continued to broadcast history programs for schools: for example, in 1972 half of the secondary schools in New South Wales turned on *History for Form IV*.³⁴

In 1959 the ABC's board began nominating prominent Australians to present annual lectures on major cultural, scientific and social issues. Several of the Boyer Lectures, as they became known, were presented by historians: Professor W. G. K. Duncan (1962); Professor Sir Keith Hancock (1973); Professor C. M. H. Clark (1976); Bernard Smith (1980); Professor Geoffrey Bolton (1992); Dr Inga Clendinnen (1999), the only woman; and Professor Geoffrey Blainey (2001).³⁵ Some were groundbreaking. Anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner's 1968 lectures addressed 'The Great Australian Silence' concerning indigenous history and dispossession.³⁶

But, in terms of internal ABC politics, it was the proposed lectures of Manning Clark in 1976 that provoked the most dissension. He was, of course, no stranger to the media or to controversy, with his impressions of the Soviet Union inspiring vigorous exchanges in the pages of the *Age*, the *Bulletin*, the *Observer* and *Tribune* in 1959-60, and the merits of his volumes of *A History of Australia* that appeared from 1962 being debated in the press.³⁷ Following Clark's public criticisms of the dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government, a Liberal backbencher questioned the propriety of the ABC's invitation, and an ABC executive effectively proposed censoring Clark's Boyer Lectures until the idea was overturned due to an intellectual, industrial and public outcry.

³³ Graeme Turner, 'Television, historical', in *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, eds Graeme Davison, John Hirst & Stuart Macintyre, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2001, p. 633.

³⁴ Inglis, *This is the ABC*, p. 317.

³⁵ <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/boyerlectures>

³⁶ Anna Clark, *History's Children: History's Wars in the Classroom*, New South, Sydney, 2008, p. 73.

³⁷ Stephen Holt, *Manning Clark and Australian History, 1915-1963*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1982, pp. 155-9, 179-84.

Clark went on to give five vividly personal talks about the making of a historian³⁸ – and, after his death in 1991, to be a central figure in Australia’s history and culture wars, in which News Limited’s *Courier-Mail* and the *Australian* were key protagonists.³⁹ Another high-profile, and often contentious, historian was Geoffrey Blainey, who triggered a public debate about immigration in 1985, and himself became a recognisable media brand.⁴⁰

There were other, somewhat more benign figures. In 1979 the journalist Peter Luck produced, co-wrote and presented *This Fabulous Century*, a 36-part television series on the Seven Network that used archival film and interviews with 300 Australians. The Logie Award-winning series preferred the narrative over the analytical, and had a strongly nostalgic appeal. Paul Kelly, a respected journalist, editor and author, wrote and presented a five-part series, *100 Years: The Australian Story*, on ABC television in 2001. These were presenter-driven explorations and, as Michelle Arrow would later intimate, reinforced the public image of a historian as male and middle-aged.⁴¹

Meanwhile, the journalist and broadcaster Tim Bowden was working for the ABC’s Department of Radio and Drama Features. In the early 1980s he was allowed to develop with the historian Dr Hank Nelson oral-history based documentaries such as *Taim Bilong Masta – The Australian Involvement with Papua New Guinea* (1981) and *Prisoners of War – Australians under Nippon* (1984). In 1985 Bowden founded the ABC’s Social History Unit, which produced *Talking History*, a weekly magazine program; *Word of Mouth*, a 15-minute interview series; and *The Feature*, a half-hour

³⁸ Inglis, *This is the ABC*, pp. 397-9; *SMH*, 5-6 October 1976.

³⁹ See Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003; Clark, *History’s Children*, New South, Sydney, 2008.

⁴⁰ Morag Fraser, ‘The media game’, in *The Fuss That Never Ended: The Life and Work of Geoffrey Blainey*, eds Deborah Gare, Geoffrey Bolton, Stuart Macintyre and Tom Stannage, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003, pp. 148-56, 192-3.

⁴¹ <http://www.peterluck.com.au/biography>; www.theaustralian.news.com.au/.../0.20867.1858566-12251.00.html; Michelle Arrow, “‘I want to be a TV historian when I grow up!’: On being a *Rewind* historian”, *Public History Review*, vol. 12, 2006.

documentary slot.⁴² The unit continues today, producing *Hindsight*, the only feature program on Australian radio devoted exclusively to social history, for Radio National. The unit's executive producers have included Dr Jane Connors, who has a PhD in Australian history, and Michelle Rayner, who has an MA in public history from the University of Technology Sydney.⁴³ If, as Arrow suggests, history has typically been used as a subject, rather than as a source, for history on television,⁴⁴ I suspect that part of the significance of the Social History Unit's productions may lie in their recognition as new sources for Australia's academic and other historians. In 2006 Radio National also began producing *Rear Vision*, looking at the historical context of current events in the news, for broadcast each Sunday afternoon.⁴⁵

When the words 'history' and 'media' are mentioned now, they probably bring to mind, for most Australians, 'living history' shows *The Colony* and *The Outback*, or perhaps ABC television's 2004 series, *Rewind*. However, it is clear that the history of history in the Australian media is a much longer one. Torney-Parlicki, Hamilton and Arrow have undertaken valuable work on the journalists as historian, the *Daily Mirror* historical feature, and history on recent television, and other Australian scholars such as Marnie Hughes-Warrington have generated a considerable literature on the relationship between film and history.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, there are many aspects of history in the Australian press, on radio and on television that remain to be examined. When does journalism become 'history'? What do popular media outlets typically define as 'history'? How did the media help develop a tradition of radical nationalism? What is the

⁴² Tim Bowden, *Spooling Through: An Irreverent Memoir*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2003, pp. 335-6 and *Shaping History Through Personal Stories*, Seventh Annual History Lecture, History Council of New South Wales, 12 September 2002, pp. 11, 22.

⁴³ <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/hindsight/about/>

⁴⁴ Arrow, "I want to be a TV historian when I grow up!"

⁴⁵ K. S. Inglis, *Whose ABC? The Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1983-2006*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2006, p. 557; <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/rearvision/about/>

⁴⁶ Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2007.

relationship between the media and anniversaries such as Australia Day and Anzac Day? Have academics and students of history begun to use history in the media as a source? Has the public image of the Australian historian changed since the days of Manning Clark and, if so, how? What role has the media played in politicising history and historians? And, perhaps most importantly for this audience, how has the nexus between media practitioners, public historians and academic historians developed, and how might, or should, it develop?

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