



Stuart Macintyre



Janet Albrechtsen

Photo – David Karonidis

In 2003, Australian historians came under fire – from each other. Keith Windschuttle, addressing The Sydney Institute, spelt out the errors he believed have riddled the works of Australia’s historians when recounting the clash between white settlers and Indigenous Aborigines. This caused an uproar from those who disagree with him. Professor Stuart Macintyre, Dean of Arts at the University of Melbourne, has since published *The History Wars (MUP 2003)* – outlining his own version of the verbal war between Australia’s historians. Janet Albrechtsen, columnist the *Australian*, has another view. The papers from the discussion at The Sydney Institute on Tuesday 16 September 200, by Stuart Macintyre and Janet Albrechtson, follow.

THE HISTORY WARS

Stuart Macintyre

What are the History Wars? They take their cue from a controversy in the United States in 1994 over an exhibition at the Smithsonian Institute to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. The curators prepared an exhibition that included the aeroplane that had dropped atomic bombs on two Japanese cities, and in consultation with historians and veterans' organisations, they presented the Enola Gay in a way that invited visitors to ponder the moral legitimacy of using this new and terrible weapon. Despite their careful preparation of the display, there was a storm of criticism in newspapers and talkback radio alleging that it insulted the national honour. The exhibition was scrapped and the director of the museum resigned.

More generally, the History Wars are concerned with the obligations of the historian and the demands of patriotism. They arise when historians question the national story and are accused of disloyalty. In countries such as the former Soviet Union and Japan the state requires historians to glorify the nation. In liberal democracies that respect intellectual freedom, the History Wars arise when politicians and talk-back radio hosts and newspaper columnists take offence at historians who suggest that this country's past reveals virtue and vice, heroism and cowardice, generosity and meanness, like the history of other countries.

Such arguments over the past gain augmented significance in a period of change and uncertainty that weakens tradition and unsettles older loyalties. The History Wars are an international phenomenon – they rage fiercely in Japan and Germany, Spain and Turkey, Canada and the United Kingdom – yet they invariably appeal to national loyalties. It is always “our history” which is at stake. The History Wars operate on the martial principle of conquest, of us against them, right and wrong, of a single correct view of history, a misunderstanding of the discipline of history and a profound hostility to the history profession.

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No war occurs without an earlier escalation of differences and the Australian History Wars broke out after earlier skirmishes. During the

1980s there was a protracted contest over the two hundredth anniversary of white settlement. Conservatives alleged that the Bicentenary was impugning the nation's British origins and promoting "a patronising 'noble savage' mystique of the Australian Aboriginal which fully caters to white guilt and black vengeance". As these charges took hold, the government replaced the chief executive and removed all contentious elements from the Bicentennial program.

Earlier still, there was a campaign to dislodge Manning Clark from his pedestal as a national prophet, while Geoffrey Blainey was taken as a martyr of political correctness and the victim of academic thuggery after he gave his Warrnambool speech in 1984.

The historical profession figured in these media controversies either as accomplice or accuser, but as the History Wars proceeded, its protagonists paid it closer attention. After the Coalition's victory in 1996 historians were condemned as part of the "elites". 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.

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 profited from its prosecution of "a campaign which has been designed above all to delegitimise the settlement of this country". 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."

In the attempt to discredit the Stolen Generations, we have more recently seen a heightening of the rhetoric. Historians are part of what a tabloid columnist called the "moral mafia" and another referred to as "white maggots". Most Australians, he added, would support Reconciliation if only the Aboriginals and their supporters would agree to "stop talking about the past".

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The History Wars are conducted in extra-curricular forums. They typically appeal to some loyalty, hope, fear or prejudice that the history is meant to serve, and if they mention an alternative view they usually caricature it or impugn the motives of those who espouse it.

Let me give some examples of the technique of vilification. On the morning of the launch of my book the *Australian* ran a feature article that presented me as a godfather who controlled and intimidated other historians, and implied that I have acted corruptly within the Australian Research Council.

Some days later a paragraph appeared in a column of the *Daily Telegraph*, alleging that more than ten years ago, when the Melbourne

Herald-Sun was campaigning against the Victorian Labor government and I was involved in a protest campaign against press bias, I had used the stationery of the University of Melbourne until I was dissuaded. That claim is false. In fact the editor of the *Herald-Sun*, who now writes for the *Daily Telegraph*, approached the Vice-Chancellor of my University and endeavoured to have him silence me. The Vice-Chancellor was David Penington, and he related the incident to me along with his own rejection of such pressure to curtail free speech. Such are the tactics of the History Warriors.

This is something more than the robust debate that we expect on a controversial subject. It is a tactic of personal denigration that is designed to discredit an opponent. The tactic was employed in its most extreme form when the *Courier-Mail* published an eight-page feature around the allegation that Manning Clark was a Soviet agent, and the Press Council rightly found that the newspaper was at fault. It is perfectly appropriate to disagree with Manning Clark's interpretation of history and to criticise the quality of his scholarship. It is another thing altogether to try and discredit him as a historian by making false claims about his character and reputation.

When Greg Melleuish wrote for the *Australian*, on the day my book was launched, he was of course entitled to take issue with my account of the History Wars. You might well think that the literary editor would have paused before giving another copy to Peter Ryan to review, since he is one of the figures in the book, just as you might have thought that Peter Coleman's review of Robert Manne's *Whitewash* was utterly predictable; but the review pages of the *Weekend Australian* have been a closed shop for many years. It was Melleuish's depiction of me as a godfather that betrayed the nature of the exercise as playing the man rather than the ball. This is a persistent tactic and it degrades public life.

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Our own History Wars have relied closely on precedents set in the United States and it is surely remarkable that those who seek to defend the national honour should be such slavish imitators in their methods and arguments. It is also disconcerting that contributors to a newspaper that is controlled by someone who adopted American citizenship to pursue his media interests there should be lecturing others on patriotism.

The pattern was set in the early 1980s when a group of Australian young conservative intellectuals took up an argument from their American counterparts. The American neoconservatives identified a shift from the class politics to cultural politics, and they identified a new enemy, the educated professionals that they described as constituting a "new class".

Robert Manne set out this argument in a book he edited in 1982 on *The New Conservatism*. He explained that the rapid growth of universities had provided a home for the student radicals of the 1960s who now dominated the humanities and social sciences. Their students in turn moved into careers in teaching, journalism, broadcasting and public service, “where the core values of our civilization were defined and shaped and passed onto the young”.

Another contributor to the collection was his colleague at La Trobe University, John Carroll, who argued that this generation was infected by “a paranoid hatred of authority” expressed “in direct attacks on the society’s leading values and institutions”. He accused them of hedonism, hatred and ideological treason.

John Carroll had a postgraduate student, Ken Baker, whom he recommended to the business think-tank, the Institute of Public Affairs. Baker applied these ideas to the proposals of the Australian Bicentennial Authority, which he suggested was undermining the legitimacy and authority of Australia’s traditions. He orchestrated the Institute’s campaign against the Bicentenary, which was quickly taken up by *Quadrant*, and a covey of commentators rose to prominence by spreading these allegations of an historical guilt industry in the popular press.

A decade later local History Warriors again imported another weapon in their arsenal from the American right, political correctness. Tenured radicals were said to have imposed a tyranny of political correctness in the academy, victimising dissident colleagues, imposing restrictive speech codes, rooting out all elements of the traditional canon and poisoning young minds with their obscure and nihilistic theory.

The *Australian* newspaper ran hard with political correctness from 1991. Political correctness shifted the terms of the History Wars. Previously it had been conducted in the language of guilt. The new class had been accused of projecting its own guilt onto society, summoning ordinary Australians to repent for the circumstances of every group it provided with an oppressed historical identity. The new allegation of political correctness turned the issue into one of freedom of thought and expression.

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Before then, there had been an instructive local development in the History Wars. In 1988 John Howard released a new policy document, *Future Directions*, which deprecated the “professional purveyors of guilt” who taught Australians “to be ashamed of their past”.

Future Directions was ambiguous about multiculturalism and Geoffrey Blainey had recently renewed the allegation that the policy was turning Australia into “a cluster of tribes” who threatened its very

survival. Shortly before it appeared Howard had been asked if a Liberal Government would mean a reduction of Asian immigration. "It could", he replied, and later on the same day said that it would be appropriate to slow the influx of Asian immigrants to preserve social cohesion.

Nick Greiner and Jeff Kennett, Liberal premiers of the two States with the largest immigrant populations, both rejected Howard's statement. So did Malcolm Fraser. Hawke exploited the division by introducing a parliamentary motion to affirm the non-discriminatory principle and four senior Liberals crossed the floor to support it. Howard never recovered from this debacle and lost the leadership in the following year.

Howard learned his lesson. The second time round he gave no hostages to fortune. He undertook in 1996 to govern "For All of Us", and fended off awkward questions about how that might affect particular segments of the national community with an insistence that he was not beholden to political correctness. Once in office, he took up the prosecution of the History Wars with a vengeance, helped this time by Geoffrey Blainey's Black Armband.

Geoffrey Blainey coined the term in a 1993 lecture in which he contrasted the earlier Three Cheers school of history that he had learned and the Black Armband school he claimed had since replaced it. The one orthodoxy was too self-congratulatory, the other too jaundiced. He placed himself, as he does so often, somewhere in the middle, between the extremes. So would I and so would just about every other historian for the argument that everything in Australian history happened for the best is as silly as the opposite argument that everything happened for the worst.

In the same lecture Blainey attempted to strike a balance between the good and the bad as debits and credits in a balance sheet. He acknowledged that European settlement damaged the land and described the treatment of Aborigines as "the blot on Australian history". He argued that these debits were more than redeemed by the record of democracy and material progress. I find this an unpersuasive argument because I think it is attempting to reconcile incommensurables. How many bales of wool and bags of wheat are needed to atone for the 20,000 lives that he has estimated as casualties of frontier violence? As Graeme Davison has noted, "We cannot put tears in one pan of the balance and laughter in the other."

I do not see Geoffrey Blainey as a History Warrior. He has certainly taken up a defence of an older Australia. He has also taken up positions strongly critical of Aboriginal land rights, the Greens, multiculturalism, republicanism and much else, and he has criticised those historians sympathetic to such causes. But he has not framed this criticism as an attack on the historical profession, and he has avoided the personal abuse that marks the History Wars.

Geoffrey Blainey has recalled that his Latham lecture aroused interest, but no strong reactions until John Howard used the phrase “Black Armband history” in a speech three years later and it then “took off like a rocket”. This overlooks Howard’s adoption of the phrase just a few weeks after Blainey first used it. He seized on it as he rallied the Liberals after their 1993 electoral defeat at the hands of Keating, and he took comfort from it when he regained the party leadership in 1995.

Once in office, he had a platform to prosecute the History Wars. In the Playford lecture delivered in 1996 he alleged that “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.” He condemned the way these revisionists “demean, pillory and tear down many great people of Australia’s past who had no opportunity to answer back”. That did not keep the Prime Minister from joining in the *Courier-Mail*’s disgraceful attack on the late Manning Clark.

In his Menzies lecture, delivered in the same year, John Howard rejected what he called the “black arm band view” that “most Australian history since 1788 has been little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination”. In contrast to Blainey’s evaluation of the costs and benefits of 200 years of history, Howard simply ticks off the items in his national ledger. His positive balance is reached by assertion rather than audit: it allows no complexity, gives no suggestion of familiarity with alternative views of Australian history.

He cares about history, for he has the ancestral attachment of a conservative traditionalist, but his historical knowledge is thin and his attempts to articulate it – as in the speech he delivered in Melbourne’s Exhibition Building in 2001 for the commemoration of the opening of the first Commonwealth parliament – are unconvincing. Sometimes, as in his response to the Stolen Generations, he insists that we should not be held responsible for the actions of earlier generations. Sometimes, on the other hand, as in his reverence for Gallipoli, he insists that the flame must be preserved. In 1999, the Prime Minister even proposed a new preamble to the Constitution that proclaimed “Australians are free to be proud of their country and heritage”.

This is the rubric for the assault on the National Museum by his appointees to its Council, and for the prosecution of the History Wars. As in the United States, the Australian History Wars are conducted by ukase. They are prepared in house journals such as *Quadrant* and the *IPA Review*, privileged forums such as the parliament and closed ones such as the news conference or media briefing. They are prosecuted in the popular press by columnists who have space reserved for their pronouncements, and yet portray themselves as audacious champions of the underdog. These fundamentalists hand down arbitrary edicts

against any form of Australian history that is deemed to impugn the national honour.

The offenders are held up to ridicule and abuse. Their evidence and argument is not examined, the issues they have raised are not assessed, and the possibility that such views are possible is not entertained. The quality of the scholarship is not a consideration. The standard of judgement is insistently political, judging the transgressor against an idealised national history.

The first casualty when war comes is truth. The History Wars respect few of the conventions that govern historical debate. History, like other professional disciplines, is characterised by lively argument as new interpretations challenge old orthodoxies: you are expected to be familiar with alternative interpretations and give a fair account of them; to demonstrate the consonance of your interpretation with the available evidence and persuade your peers of its plausibility; to present your own argument as persuasively as possible but not by resorting to personal abuse of those with whom you disagree; to allow others a right of reply.

Not so the History Warriors. They obey only Rafferty's rules. They caricature their opponents and impugn their motives. They appeal to loyalty, hope, fear and prejudice. In their intimidation of the history profession they act as bullies. In submitting history to a loyalty test, they debase it. Australians deserve more from their history than the History Wars.