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'The fallacy of Presentism in Australian history: a cautionary tale', *Honest History*, 23 August 2016

A significant section of the historical profession is currently exhibiting a dubious enthusiasm for "Presentism". That is to say some practitioners of the discipline are using their positions as political-cultural pedagogues to advance interpretations of the nation's past which they hope will help promote their current political agendas.¹ One may well question whether this meets the standards for completely "honest history". The passion and partisanship would tend immediately to disqualify it because such writing does not aim to reconstruct the past as accurately as possible taking into account all influences on decision-makers that can be reasonably ascertained. Rather it is a mode of doing history as a political tool by choosing those elements of the multifaceted past which seem in the writer's view to support a particular ideological position. So what we are being offered are often narratives that are in effect thinly disguised political tracts which advocate current political objectives. As a form of historical propaganda Presentism is as old as writing itself and it comes in various forms, some of which are so scholarly in appearance that the untutored reader is easily misled into believing that what has been recounted is an accurate or at least credible picture of the past. It needs to be kept in mind that all national history is a *Politikum* because no human being can entirely escape her educational-cultural formation and so the value system in which the historian takes up her pen to write remains fixed in the mental-spiritual furniture. Nevertheless it is an obligation laid upon historians in an open society to strive for detachment. Those who feel compelled to write tendentiously advocating an assessment of the past which is intended to serve current political objectives are practising Presentism. The highly esteemed Australian scholar Inga Clendinnen has, perhaps without intentionally doing so, warned against "Presentism" as follows: "The discipline of history demands rigorous self-criticism, a patient, even attentiveness, and a practiced tolerance for uncertainty. It also requires that pleasure be taken in the epistemological problems which attend the attempt to recover the density of the past actuality from its residual traces."² Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) would have applauded such a formulation.

But since historians are people of flesh and blood, with often passionate allegiance such as in religion or political ideology there will always be historiographical controversy. And this seems to be happening in the current debates about the rightness or wrongness of Australia's involvement in the Great War, for example. One needs to be clear about the political-pedagogic function of history and one must realise that historiographical disagreement comes with living in a pluralist, open society, where the freedom of speech is a universal right. We have, thankfully, in this country what the German scholar Jürgen Habermas has called an "open speech situation" and an arguably free press, both of which are the first pre-requisites for any democracy. There is no Australian version of a ministry of culture and education that monitors what is published and controls the teaching agenda of our schools, such as there was/is in totalitarian countries. There is a corollary to this, however. One may not vilify one's putative ideological enemy; it suffices to point out any methodological or ideological shortcomings. As the late Sir Zelman Cowen, who was a lawyer, used to say: "Your right to swing your fist stops at the tip of my nose".³

I

Briefly, in an attempt to define what is meant by Presentism one needs to be mindful of two aspects of the phenomenon. First, it is the tendency to interpret the past in Presentist terms, that is, to use the past selectively as a store house of ideas and issues that can be imported into the present to support current political-pedagogic agendas. Second, it tends to prefer the shifting of historical interest away from the remoter past and rather concentrate on the contemporary era in which one has a current underlying political-pedagogic objective.⁴ As D H Fischer has pointed out (see footnote No. 2) this kind of historiography results in grotesque distortions so that the work of historians who operate in this mode raises many doubts as to its credibility. It belongs more appropriately in the realm of propaganda. This is exactly what the late Oliver McDonagh and Conor Cruise O'Brien, both historians of Ireland, said about many Irish writers who quite frankly use bits and pieces of Irish history out of context to promote current political agendas.⁵ As such they are blatant purveyors of Presentism in their writing motivated by their deeply felt patriotism (nationalism) coupled with their long standing bitterness over Britain. Certainly an in-depth analysis of this subject would serve as a highly useful illustration of the fallacy of Presentism. Here I first wish to advance an even more blatant example out of my own field of research, namely the communist historiography of the German labour movement that came out of the former German Democratic Republic, mainly because it claimed to be strictly scientific (*wissenschaftlich*) whereas in reality it was consciously biased and confined in the straitjacket of Marxism-Leninism. Of course, it is largely of antiquarian interest now but it is salutary to remember that it posed a massive challenge to historians in the capitalist West and dominated the discussion of the Cold War for decades.

Marxism-Leninism as extreme Presentism

It is instructive here to focus sharply on the in-built Presentism of the ideology of Marxism-Leninism as it affected historiography. It was arguably the most obvious example of Presentism ever advanced and was based on the so-called “claim to total truth” (*absoluter Wahrheitsanspruch*) which the ideologues of East Berlin and Moscow upheld. It is most instructive to be aware of the way in which the Marxist-Leninists aficionados justified this absurd sounding claim. Briefly, it dogmatised Marx's famous periodisation of history: primitive communism, slave society, feudalism, capitalism, socialism. Once the stage of industrial revolution had been reached in the 19th century and capitalism took off, it spawned the industrial proletariat, the toiling masses who only had their labour power to bargain with. Their exploitation by the owners of production, distribution and exchange inspired the “labour aristocracy”, meaning the better educated workers, to organise the masses into trade unions in order to influence the labour market and then to form a social democratic party to agitate for pro-labour legislation in parliaments. These two labour organisations, industrial and political, formed the matrix for the emergence of the revolutionary party of the proletariat which would wrest political power from the capitalist class and bring about the dictatorship of the proletariat.⁶ The promise was that now the economy would be managed not for the production of surplus value for the capitalists (the “fetishism of commodities”) but for the daily needs of the toiling masses (each according to his needs). This was entirely just because profits in

capitalism were generated by misappropriating the surplus value which only labour power supplied (the labour theory of value).

Once the ruling party of the proletariat was in power it could pioneer the path to a glorious future for all humanity, the birth of a “new species being”; hence the need to export revolution throughout the world. The task of history professors was to teach this ideology obediently, and they were monitored in their work by the various ministries of culture and education in all communist countries. In East Germany, in the so-called German Democratic Republic, the first and long-serving party secretary Walter Ulbricht (1893-1973) of the SED (Socialist Unity Party) paid close attention to how history should be taught in the schools and universities. The subject was, after all the context for explaining the triumph and future policies of the party. So the most grotesque form of Presentism was imposed on the discipline of history. Indeed, at a special conference of history professors convened in East Berlin, Walter Ulbricht lectured them on their political-pedagogic task.⁷ Especially in relating the history of the labour movement the historians were admonished to be ideologically extremely selective. Presentism was thus prioritised. One focussed only on those personalities who advanced Marxism-Leninism because that ensured the triumph of the ruling party of the proletariat. Only that ideologically pure party led by courageous and thoroughly schooled Marxist-Leninists was capable of pioneering the path to the future because it knew the right history of the growth of the party. And the central committee of the party – in practice it was the party secretary – could nominate who those persons were. That was the background to how the many purges of alleged renegades were justified.

This explains why, for example, in the officially-sanctioned East German history of the labour movement the key personalities of Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864) and Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932) are not mentioned.⁸ Although Lassalle had done more to organise the party that became the Social Democratic Party he was declared a non-person by the SED because he adopted the theory of the “iron law of wages” (Ricardo) which had been judged by Marx to be fallacious. Neither is Bernstein mentioned because he demonstrated the fallacy of Marx’s theory of the accumulation of capital and so he was guilty of the heresy of “Revisionism”. Neither Lassalle nor Bernstein had ever existed. To recognise the presence and achievements of these leading personalities in the German labour movement no longer suited the ideological purposes of the party so they were expunged from its history. There were many instances of this in the countries of the Soviet bloc. So historians in the countries of *Real Existing Socialism* had to function as party ideologues and give up any idea of being free enquirers and interpreters of the past. This is why the case of the Soviet bloc represented Presentism in its most virulent form. It was rigorously enforced and no form of dissent was tolerated. Indeed, all totalitarian dictatorships need to control what students learn about the history of their country to make them loyal and above all pliant subjects of the regime. That episode of contemporary history, namely the rise and fall of totalitarian socialism, certainly illustrates how effective history can be as a means of indoctrination of students. In fact with the reunification of Germany in 1990 all university staff, especially historians, in the former GDR were examined by a committee set up for the purpose to establish whether their former association with the ideology of the regime had been genuine. Old communist historians were simply pensioned off.

Having outlined the once most influential form of Presentism it can now be said that it was a manifestation of a political wish-dream of visionaries who fervently/ruthlessly strove for a reconstitution of the world, namely the elimination of

capitalism and its replacement by a genuinely socialist economy. But like all fundamentalists, they occupied a parallel universe. Essentially, Marx had projected the emergence of a “new species being”, in effect a re-invented race of people whose mentality, values and needs would be so transformed through socialism that basically all forms of greed would be eliminated, including the need for God, religion being the opiate of the masses. Then men such as Lenin, Stalin and Ulbricht fashioned this ideology into “Real Existing Socialism” sometimes called “Actually Existing Socialism”. Under this system, social and political goals were determined by the ruling party of the working class. After having plagued and oppressed the subjects of their various countries and terrorised the “free world” with their policies for over half a century the entire edifice “imploded”. The communist parties that were allowed to exist within the democratic west also in the end “imploded” when it became obvious that they had no future, especially when the material and moral support of the Soviet Communist party had to be withdrawn (Mikhail Gorbachev’s *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*).⁹ The Communist Party in China survives in power because paradoxically it actually promotes the capitalism which according to their version of Marxism-Leninism (Maoism) was formerly the root cause of all human injustice and misery. The corollary to the abandonment of the communist ideology and allowing a capitalist economy to take over would be the abandonment of the dictatorship of the communist party and the holding of free elections. But in China the introduction of free elections would in all probability result in anarchy because the various ethnic regions of that vast country would tend to split off into separate, rival cultural-political units and China would lose its great power status and end up in a fragmented situation comparable to the former Soviet Union today. So the dictatorship of the Communist Party of China remains but for strictly internal Chinese reasons. In any case the Marxist-Leninist wish-dream has been consigned to the rubbish heap of history. It is indeed a cautionary tale.

II Australian manifestations of Presentism

Wish-dreams in the form of lesser Presentisms, however, continue to excite the minds of historians throughout the world and can and do promote political mayhem as the afore-mentioned case of Ireland illustrates. Purveyors of Presentism in other Western countries do not pose such existential threats thanks to the in-built tolerance of “open societies”. Indeed some forms of Presentism such as Whig-ism are essentially benevolent because they prioritise those events and personalities of the past which have functioned to advance the cause of freedom and the self-determination of individual nations. For example, Professor George Arnold Wood in Sydney 1890-1928 taught quite ingenuously that, at its core, the course of English history was clearly a path to the emancipation of all subjects of the Empire as a basic human right and that British power should be employed in promoting this objective.¹⁰ As DH Fischer observed, those “complex anachronisms” which abound in such works “are not merely matters of sterile academic interest. They are snares that have caught up many people in the world.” Indeed, Fischer went on to affirm that while many authors were able and intelligent men, their honest attempts [ingenuous?] to understand the thought patterns of earlier generations were marred by “analytical anachronism.”¹¹ This, as shall be seen, is not easy to overcome.

In what follows selective examples of Australian historians will serve to illustrate the fallacy of Presentism. One of the most spectacular is Cambridge-based

Sir Christopher Clark. In his widely acclaimed latest book, *The Sleepwalkers* (2012), Clark has acquired a stellar reputation for having made an alleged dramatic breakthrough in our understanding of how the First World War really broke out. In short, by arguing that all the belligerents were equally culpable Clark has been lavished with praise and acclamation from most conservative German historians and journalists; those on the democratic left are far from being so sanguine. Clark neglects in their view to evaluate German political culture, especially the engrained militarism of the power elite and the hostility to the labour movement. All these factors played a key part in influencing the German posture in Europe since Bismarck and, fatefully, also the decision-making process leading up to 1914. Clark's narrative is indeed a copy book example of Presentism since his objective is to tell the Germany of today that its ancestor, Bismarckian-Wilhelmine Germany, was no less belligerent than any of the other Great Powers at the time. That is to say he wishes to release Germans from any particular, still current sense of guilt for their part in unleashing the 'seminal catastrophe of the 20th century' (George Kennan). In accomplishing this, Clark, while he has trawled an unprecedented range of archives, has been accused of only citing those documents that support his case.¹² As well, subsequently, an historian in the USA has discovered vital new sources which place *German intentionality* in causing the Great War beyond doubt. The private correspondence of the German Chancellor's personal assistant, Kurt Riezler (1882-1955) has been discovered by the German-born American historian Gunther Roth. With John Röhl these letters have been edited and published as *Aus dem grossen Hauptquartier: Kurt Riezlers Briefe an Käthe Liebermann 1914-15* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag 2016).¹³ This material takes on a central significance in negating Christopher Clark's interpretation of why there was a Great War in the first place.

Although Clark's work *The Sleepwalkers* has enjoyed a remarkable, indeed sensational reception throughout the English speaking world, as well as in Germany itself, no one, it appears, has alighted upon the fact that the book is a brilliant exercise in historiographical sleight of hand, as a critical examination will show. As indicated, the left-liberal historians in Germany are far from impressed and point out Clark's omissions and tendentiousness.¹⁴ The more extreme Left in Germany, of course, accuses all Great Powers, because of their capitalism to be endemically rapacious and militaristic. However, because it was German imperialism that actually brought the war about, Germany bears the chief responsibility. The Chancellor then in office, Bethmann-Hollweg, having been replaced in July 1917, conceded after the war that Germany had unleashed what he called a "preventive war".¹⁵ What that means is that the German government was supposed to have been convinced that the Reich was "encircled" and about to be attacked by the Entente powers, but this, of course, is not sustainable as Imanuel Geiss had shown.¹⁶ So, in reality, Germany launched a war of aggression for expansionist aims on the one hand and in order to shore up the existing domestic power structure on the other.¹⁷ Clark has made an international reputation by promoting what is regarded by some as demonstrably an historical subterfuge, a deliberate obfuscation that not a few people want to believe because it is balm to their injured patriotic feelings. John Röhl has most recently pointed this out.¹⁸

Another high profile Australian historian, Peter Cochrane, the acclaimed author of *Colonial Ambition*¹⁹ and other distinguished works, has emphatically endorsed Clark's work in a recent article in the 2015 *Griffith Review* where in a few sentences he dismissed the work of the entire Fischer school in Germany which includes as well the aforementioned Anglo-German historian, Professor John Röhl, until recently of Sussex University.²⁰ The fact that Cochrane and many other

Australian historians seem to believe what they want to believe prevents them from really examining the established overseas authorities. If they consulted Röhl's extensive work, they could not pronounce such a blanket endorsement of Clark's persuasive Presentism. They are affected by association. In his response to Clark, Röhl points to his failure to take on board the uncomfortable facts discovered already by Fritz Fischer and Imanuel Geiss. When these are digested there can be absolutely no suggestion that the Great War of 1914 broke out because of a somnambulists' stumble. Indeed, Röhl portrays in clinical detail how the German leadership manoeuvred the July-August crisis hoping to keep Britain out of the conflict and to prevent the Kaiser from getting cold feet and "toppling" over. The politicians and generals even went to the extent of delaying delivery to the Kaiser of the warning telegrams from ambassador Lichnowsky in London. In short, the German power elite unquestionably manipulated the crisis, and when they believed that Britain would not intervene the jubilant Kaiser responded by calling for champagne so confident was he and his advisors that the Schlieffen Plan would deliver the hoped-for victory over France and Russia – war by time table.²¹

Failure to take notice of all this is a telling example of the Presentism currently afflicting some Australian historians. So bent are they on projecting and sustaining a belief that Britain's wars had nothing to do with Australia or New Zealand that they quietly pass over any unpalatable facts. For example, no one mentions the consequences for Australasia had the German navy managed to sweep the Royal Navy from the sea or particularly the existence of the German East Asia Squadron and its war plans for the Pacific Dominions. This research may as well not exist.²² As the Germans often say in such situations, Peter Cochrane seems to be "totally unprejudiced by any relevant factual knowledge" or at least he betrays no evidence of being informed about all this and has simply welcomed Christopher Clark's assessment as the best explanation to serve the purposes of his school of thought.²³ The mystery is why it is so difficult for educated people to comprehend the extent and implications of imperial German war-aims. The explanation seems to be that if they did so there would be no grounds for the ongoing denigration of British policy. The last thing they want is to acknowledge that political realism in the era of great power rivalries demanded Empire solidarity, and so here we have Presentism with a vengeance.²⁴ How can Australia maintain subservience to what is essentially a foreign monarchy that was manifestly so ruthless and grasping back in 1914?

The final example that space allows for consideration is that of [Henry Reynolds, *Unnecessary Wars* \(2016\)](#). Here we have another copybook example of Presentism that, ironically, recommends itself as a set book in undergraduate courses in historiography. Students would learn that some of their teachers actually inhabit a parallel universe. That would be pedagogically important because students would comprehend early in their intellectual development that some historians have different, highly ideologically motivated agendas and tend to adopt the mental stance of quasi-religious preachers. They are out to win converts. Reynolds has been rightly acclaimed for drawing attention to the virtually genocidal treatment of Aborigines in the 19th century and the discrimination against them up to the present day. The nation may not forget that and needs to prioritise reparation. On the other hand Reynolds and others like him are writing about Australia's involvement in overseas wars as events that should rightly be forgotten, or rather should never have happened. Remembrance of the thousands of fallen for the causes in which citizens at the time earnestly believed is deplored. No doubt this will provoke a negative reaction among citizens who see these events differently and who genuinely mourn the thousands of young

lives sacrificed. Of course, people who advocate, for example, the abolition of Anzac Day are entitled to do so because of the democratic right to dissent. But by the same token the right of those who want to or feel the need to remember should be respected. Why, indeed, is it not possible to acknowledge both positions simultaneously? Reasonable people acknowledge the wrongs perpetrated against the original occupants of this land and want to make reparation. Likewise, people will also understand the need for national defence and to maintain well-trained armed forces. And these forces have been deployed for compelling existential reasons both in the past as in the present.

The confusion in the minds of sceptics, namely those who argue that the dominions only participated in the overseas wars at the behest of Britain (now replaced by the United States of America) arises from an inability to comprehend the implicit dangers of Great Power rivalries. It is a case of “you believe what you choose to believe” no matter how ill-informed you are. The Australasian dependencies of Britain had always been wary of the policies of imperial Germany, Russia, France and Japan in the Pacific region. It was the *conditio sine qua non* of colonial self-perception that Britain should continue to be able to maintain her protective power via the Royal Navy. Certainly, there were vigorous republican voices expressing the view that ties with Britain ought to be severed in order to realise true nationhood. Australasian political leaders, however, more in touch with the realities of Great Power rivalries, perceived the world otherwise. There was always the possibility of one or other of the Great Powers posing a threat to Australasian security. Isolation bred anxiety. Consequently, it was a fact of colonial life that there would be ongoing debate concerning whether the colonies could actually stand alone in the real world. Behind the frequent expressions of Antipodean sentiment for the mother country was always the sober calculation that the link with Great Britain was essential not just for commercial and cultural reasons but particularly for defence.²⁵

Professor Reynolds is aware of all this but prefers to argue that those Australians who prioritised defence as an argument to remain loyal to Britain were mistaken, indeed misled by their forelock-tugging cringe towards the mother country. More sober and mature colonial Australians were genuinely patriotic, advocating a home-grown nationalism comparable to that of the United States. There was first no danger of invasion from any foreign powers because of the geographical remoteness of Australia and, second, there had emerged since white settlement an identifiably unique Australian culture that was superior to that of the mother country and which was only being stunted in its growth by the retention of the monarchy. Reynolds cites several eloquent colonial thinkers such as John Dunmore Lang (Scottish-born) and Andrew Inglis Clark (Tasmanian-born) who argued that a genuine Australian identity could only develop if a republican course were followed. These republican advocates advanced rational arguments, preaching in effect that the colonies should unite and follow the examples of the United States of America or of Mazzini’s Italy. Such examples were held up as virtual laws of history which ought to have been followed. Andrew Inglis Clark, for example, had been an admirer of Mazzini and argued in a way very similar to Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), namely, that in each region of the earth the inhabitants developed a distinct national spirit (*Volksgeist*) which strove for independence from externally-imposed imperial power. This was virtually a law of nature. And the Americans had realised it. That these ideas were in circulation among educated Australians is not at all surprising and it is Reynolds’ undoubted merit to have reminded us of them.²⁶ Indeed, there can be no doubt that

different environments do exert profound shaping influences on the way peoples develop, and on this theme there exists a considerable literature.²⁷

Reynolds also draws attention to a body of literature which advocated imperial federation. Instead of divergent paths to national independence, imperial federationists during the age of increasing imperialist rivalries recommended that Britain's overseas self-governing dependencies should become members of one great British nation with a central parliament in London. The intellectual fathers of this idea presented by Reynolds were James Anthony Froude (1818-1894) who wrote a book based on his tour of the world called *Oceania* (1886) and just prior to that the Cambridge history professor Sir John Robert Seeley (1834-1895) who had never travelled across the world but had published his lectures entitled *The Expansion of England* (1883). This work had a remarkable resonance at the time. Seeley's thesis was that people of the same race and political culture ought to federate as the various Germanic tribes did under Bismarck in 1871. Indeed there were four tribes or nations already in the British Isles that were fused into the British nation. To men like Froude, Seeley and others it made sense for cultural, commercial and defence reasons to move towards imperial federation.

What is of note here is that neither the centrifugal dream of antipodean republicanism on the one hand, nor the centripetal force of imperial federation on the other hand, came to fruition. The reason was clearly that neither of the advanced solutions could meet the existing realities or perceptions in the mind of a free-thinking population. The republican element based their case on the inevitable development of a new culture in the antipodes and the assumption that remoteness from the powder kegs of Europe made the imperial connection both inhibiting and totally unnecessary. In a free trade economy in any case whether one was politically associated with Britain did not matter in the least. Both the United States of America and the countries of Latin America demonstrated this. Commerce simply followed the eternal laws of supply and demand across national borders. And, in any case, as Reynolds recalls more Britons migrated to the United States during the 19th century than they did to the overseas dependencies. They were certainly not motivated by imperial sentiment but by something else: the need for survival. The republican argument seemed to recommend itself with an inexorable logic.

Imperial federationists on the other hand based their argument on the need for both continued cultural and trade ties plus the need for viable defence arrangements because imperial rivalries could at any time escalate into shooting wars in which the dependencies could be embroiled. These, as Reynolds insists, were, of course, totally unnecessary. And it is here where his argument stands or falls. Britain is depicted as a ruthlessly grasping land hungry militaristic power always ready to go to war to advance her nefarious objectives. Some fifty wars are counted between the Napoleonic era and the Great War. Were all of these unnecessary? And, more to the point, were the overseas dependencies at any stage in danger of attack from foreign expansionist powers?

Focussing on the Boer War Professor Reynolds triumphantly cites the speeches in the various colonial, later state, parliaments by their respective premiers who all emphasize unwavering solidarity with the mother country. On the surface these are effusive declarations of filial loyalty. Underneath the jingoism, however, lay a genuine and justifiable fear. If the great imperial power of Britain were to be defeated by the Boer farmers of Transvaal and the Orange Free State, her ability to defend the other exposed colonies, especially in the Pacific, in the event of a challenge from one of the other Great Powers would be severely diminished. In short,

there was a strong element of colonial anxiety about a sustainable future, essential to which was the continuation of a British political culture in the colonies. So what was the dominant colonial self-perception under these circumstances? It was unthinkable that colonial leaders could declare “business as usual” and ignore the implications of the Boer War. Given the anti-British attitudes that prevailed at the time within the Kaiser’s Germany trying to organise an anti-British alliance among the Powers, there was every justification for colonial anxiety. Issues such as the “Anglo-German antagonism” (Paul Kennedy) and Joseph Chamberlain’s efforts to overcome it at the time of the Boer War are conveniently ignored by Professor Reynolds. The Presentism of his enterprise is overwhelming. And here again *Unnecessary Wars* recommends itself as an excellent text for undergraduate courses as an antidote to history as ideology to promote current political objectives. Neither the domestic political nor the foreign policy concerns are equitably considered.

Obviously, in any open society, as indicated at the beginning, one should expect a variety of conflicting opinions on the great political issues. These are of existential relevance. Inevitably some people will be better informed than others so argument will be unavoidable. In the case of the Boer War the most prominent extra parliamentary opponent was the aforementioned doctrinaire Whig Professor of History at the University of Sydney, GA Wood. Like the British liberal academic critics of British policy, Wood based his opposition on moral grounds; it was a betrayal of British principles of decency, liberal democracy and the rights of small nations to prosecute such a war. Precisely on these grounds did Wood energetically support Britain’s policy of opposing imperial Germany in 1914.²⁸ As Professor Reynolds has shown by consulting the debates in both houses of each of the six colonial parliaments in 1898-99 the majority of colonial politicians most emphatically endorsed Britain’s cause in fighting the Boers and the sending of contingents actually to fight in what appeared to some as a totally unjust and unnecessary war. On the surface their oft reiterated justification for taking this fateful step was unquestioning loyalty to the Empire on the principle of “my country right or wrong”. These men, argues Professor Reynolds, were totally unable to assess the immorality of what was from start to finish nothing more or less than a brutal and grasping capitalist campaign. Surely that should have been clear from the beginning, especially when high profile British scholars and humanitarians had had the courage publicly to oppose the nefarious enterprise. Sadly no; the Australian Empire loyalists were drawn into the jingoistic debacle and apparently gladly paid the price of some 600 Australian troops killed. The around 30 000 dead Boer men, women and mostly children who had been ruthlessly corralled in concentration camps were scarcely registered. The final British victory over the Boers was cause for unseemly patriotic jubilation. Its general effect was to engender in the Australian population a love of participating on “other people’s wars”; being part of the greatest Empire the world had ever seen was a source of immense pride among the newly-federated colonies which formed the Commonwealth of Australia. Having been born and baptised, so to speak, in a colonial war injected into the Australian DNA an indelible martial component. It was a tragedy of immeasurable proportions. It was, in short, the beginning of a sinister tradition which has been re-expressed on numerous occasions ever since. Australians have placed their martial capacity at the disposal of the successor power to the British Empire, our “great and powerful friend”, the United States of America. This was an extremely bad policy move because it placed Australia in the position of “deputy sheriff”, the one who takes orders from his superior and who may be discharged at

any time at the sheriff's whim. Moreover, that status renders the nation a target of aggression by any enemy of the United States.

As Professor Reynolds and his allies read history this disastrous trend had become part of the Australian DNA ever since the ill-advised decision was taken to send colonial contingents to the Boer War. Dr Douglas Newton has characterised it in his book on how Australia became embroiled in its most sacrificial conflict ever, namely the Great War of 1914-18, by saying that our leaders and the nation were "hell-bent" on getting there.²⁹ So what is being proposed instead of eagerly supporting "great and powerful friends"? In short, Australia must excise the old militaristic DNA and become essentially pacifist. The short answer to that is it would be the preferred option if only the warlike nations would permit it. What is being left out of the equation – and here the Presentist agenda looms largest – is the foreign policy of those Powers who cultivate(d) ambitious expansionist aims which placed our political existence in danger. Of course, it is undeniable that being part of the British Empire made the distant dominions vulnerable to attack. But with expansionist powers like Wilhelmine Germany well established in the Pacific, so would they have still been had they been isolated republics in the South Seas.

Concluding observations

As already indicated, not all works with Presentist agendas are without redeeming features. And this is the case with *Unnecessary Wars*. It draws attention to the longstanding subterranean debate in Australian intellectual circles about the essential nature of true nationhood. As such, the book is a kind of minority report on the question of the usefulness to Australia of the imperial connection. For this reason alone it should be "read, marked, learned and inwardly digested" like Holy Scripture for the edification of all students of Australian history. Young aspiring minds would then learn about the fallacies of Presentism. The book is predicated on the assumption that British policy was permanently driven solely by grasping capitalist aims. Indeed, the author finds it necessary for his political-pedagogic agenda to sustain the thesis that the Pacific dominions had no stake in Britain's wars in the past and certainly none in those of the United States in the present. These commitments have always worked out very badly for them, especially Australia. And despite the horrendous cost in young Australian lives, the nation has allegedly developed a curiously morbid devotion to martial values expressed in the cult of Anzac and the sending of expeditionary forces overseas to fight in "other people's wars". And, as a corollary to this, the Commonwealth is spending inordinate sums of money on remembrance of the First World War at this time. All these points are debatable, of course.

What one misses in Professor Reynolds' enterprise is any preparedness to investigate the *context*, first of Britain's foreign policy difficulties, especially with imperial Germany at the time of the Boer War. Indeed, the Great Power rivalries at the time are not assessed, although the magisterial work of scholars such as Paul M. Kennedy and more recently that of John Röhl on Kaiser Wilhelm II are readily available.³⁰ The second major consideration is the assumption that colonial, then dominion, support for Britain was based purely on sentiment for the mother country and completely lacking in any hard-headed concern for local national interests. Behind the flowery rhetoric that affirmed filial loyalty to the mother country was indeed the *Realpolitik* concern that with the eclipse of Britain as a Great Power the future of the dominions as independent nations with a democratic political culture

would be jeopardised. If historians leave out the *context* in which decisions in the past, remote or recent, were/are taken the result will not be history, but Presentism.

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¹ David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Towards a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Collins): 135-42. The notable Austrian historian Heinrich Ritter von Srbik (1878-1950) in his *Geist und Geschichte* 2 Vols. (Munich: Bruckmann; Salzburg: Müller, 1964) observed on page 369 of volume II that "Leopold von Ranke had once (1873) impressed upon a young historian: 'We have always to bear in mind that history is a matter of conscience'. [Srbik expatiated] "The ethical consequences which flow from this observation require honesty, unbiased and strictest striving for truth, responsibility, avoidance of error. The passing of value judgements (*Werturteile*) may occur only after the even-handed and thorough examination of all sides [of the issue] in relentless self discipline. [One must demonstrate] courage in acknowledging – as far as possible – the truth of what one discovers."

² Inga Clendinnen, "Dispatches from the History Wars" in *Agamemnon's Kiss: Selected Essays* (Melbourne: Text Publishing Company, 2006): 155.

³ Personal recollection of conversation with Sir Zelman when he was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Queensland.

⁴ See the Address to the *American Historical Association* by the President, Lynn Hunt, May 2002 in the *News Magazine* of the AHA.

⁵ I quoted McDonagh and O'Brien in this regard in a paper, "Other People's Wars or the Pivotal Event in Australia's History", Proceedings of the Independent Scholars' Association of Australia Conference of 2008 on the theme *The National Estate – Civic Heritage*, pp. 193-208. See Oliver McDonagh, *States of Mind: A Study of Anglo-Irish Conflict, 1780-1980* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983) and *The Sharing of the Green: A Modern Irish History for Australians* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996); Conor Cruise O'Brien, *God Land: Reflections on Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

⁶ Explained in detail in my two books, *Trade Unionism in Germany from Bismarck to Hitler*, 2 Vols (London & New York: George Prior, 1982) and *Trade Union Theory from Marx to Walesa* (New York, Oxford & Munich: Berg, 1990).

⁷ Walter Ulbricht, "Über den Charakter der Novemberrevolution": Rede in der Kommission zur Vorbereitung der Thesen über die Novemberrevolution, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* VI Jg, Heft 4 (1958): 717-29.

⁸ *Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* in 8 Bänden (Berlin Ost: Dietz, 1966).

⁹ *Glasnost* means "openness" and *Perestroika* means "restructuring." Gorbachev (born 1931) was General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party 1985-91.

¹⁰ RM Crawford, *'A Bit of a Rebel': The Life and Work of George Arnold Wood* (Sydney University Press, 1975).

¹¹ Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 135.

¹² Werner Röhr, *Hundert Jahre deutsche Kriegsschulddebatte: Vom Weissbuch 1914 zum heutigen Geschichtsrevisionismus* (Hamburg: VASA Verlag, 2015).

¹³ See the review by Professor Gerd Krumeich, "Schlafwandler, bitte aufwachen!" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18 May 2016, p. 10. As well, see the work of two British-based, high profile German historians, Andreas Gestrich and Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, (eds), *Bid for World Power: New Research on the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) forthcoming. Therein, see the chapter by John Röhl, "War

Premeditated? The ‘War Council’ of 8 December 1912 Revisited”. Further background research by Röhl has demonstrated that the German determination to start a war against both France and Russia had been formulated much earlier. In this context see Ian Kershaw, *Fateful Choices: Ten Decisions that Changed the World 1940-1941* (London: Penguin, 2007).

¹⁴ Röhr, *Hundert Jahre deutsche Kriegsschulddebatte*. See especially the critique of Clark in chapter 6 entitled, *Bestseller des Geschichtsrevisionismus*, 122-148, i.e. “the best seller of historical revisionism.”

¹⁵ Röhr, *Hundert Jahre deutsche Kriegsschulddebatte*, 163. See also Konrad Jarausch, “The Illusion of Limited War: Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg’s Calculated Risk”, *Central European History*, vol. 2 01 (March 1969): 48.

¹⁶ Imanuel Geiss, *July 1914: The Outbreak of the First World War: Selected Documents* (London: Batsford, 1967). See his conclusions, p. 361: “The outbreak of the First World War was not the result of blind, unfathomable fate, nor need its causes defy rational analysis by the historian.”

¹⁷ John A. Moses, “Germany 1918: A Case of Dual Frustration” in *The German Empire and Britain’s Pacific Dominions 1871-1919*, edited by John A. Moses & Christopher Pugsley (Claremont Calif.: Regina Books, 2000): 415-32.

¹⁸ John C. G. Röhl, “Goodbye to All That (Again)? The Fischer Thesis, the New Revisionism and the Meaning of the First World War”, *International Affairs* 91: 1 (2015): 153-66.

¹⁹ *Colonial Ambition: Foundations of Australian Democracy* (Melbourne University Press, 2006).

²⁰ Peter Cochrane, ‘The Past is Not Sacred’, *Griffith Review* 48: Enduring Legacies, <https://griffithreview.com/articles/past-sacred/>, viewed 23 August 2016. *Contra*, see Annika Mombauer, “The Fischer Controversy Fifty Years on”, *Journal of Contemporary History* April 2013, 48 (2): 231-40; “The Fischer Controversy. Documents and the ‘Truth’ about the Origins of the First World War”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, April 2013, 48 (2) 290-314. See as well her edition of *The Origins of the First World War: Diplomatic and Military Documents* (Manchester University Press, 2013). Most recently see her review article, “Guilt or Responsibility? The Hundred Years Debate on the Origins of World War 1” in *Central European History* 48 (2015): 541-64.

²¹ John Röhl, *Wilhelm II: Into the Abyss of War and Exile* (Cambridge University Press: 2014): 1162. For confirmation of the German determination to exploit the Sarajevo assassination to urge Austria-Hungary to move against Serbia, see Bernd F. Schulte, *Das Deutsche Reich von 1914: Europäische Konföderation und Weltreich* (Hamburg: Hamburger Studien zu Geschichte und Zeitgeschehen, 2012), 9-18. Here Schulte exposes the real motivation for German urging of the weaker ally to punish Serbia and thus provoke Russia to attack both Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Germans needed to appear as merely hastening to the aid of their only reliable ally, whereas in reality it was to be the downbeat to a well thought-out plan to redraw the map of Europe in Berlin.

²² John A. Moses, “Alfred von Tirpitz: Architect of the Imperial German Battle Fleet” in *The War at Sea: Proceedings of the King-Hall Naval Conference 2013* (Canberra: Sea Power Centre, 2015): 23-34.

²³ The German formulation goes like this: “Er ist gar nicht voreingenommen von irgendwelchen Fachkenntnissen,” which is meant very ironically to say, “He is by no means prejudiced in his views by any reliable expert knowledge.”

²⁴ A further example is the work of Douglas Newton, *Hell-Bent: Australia’s Leap into the Great War*, (Melbourne: Scribe, 2014).

²⁵ Neville Meaney, *The Search for Security in the Pacific 1901-1914*, Vol I of *A History of Australian Defence and Foreign Policy 1901-1923* (Sydney University Press, 2009); ditto, (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1996); David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1999); Geoffrey Bolton, “Federated Australia: Republic of the South Seas or New Britannia?”, in *The German Empire and Britain’s Pacific Dominions 1871-1919: Essays on the Role of Australia and New*

Zealand in World Politics in the Age of Imperialism (Claremont, Calif. : Regina Books, 2000): 141-54.

²⁶ Reynolds here draws upon the work of Professor Mark McKenna on the 19th century advocates of Australian republicanism: *Unnecessary Wars*: 75.

²⁷ An excellent place to start would be Friedrich Meinecke's, *Cosmopolitanism and the Nation State* (translation of *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat* 1922).

²⁸ John Anthony Moses, *Prussian-German Militarism in Australian Perspective: The Thought of George Arnold Wood* (Frankfurt am Main & Zurich: Peter Lang, 1991): 40-43.

²⁹ Newton, *Hell-Bent* and *The Darkest Days: The Truth behind Britain's Rush to War, 1914* (London: Verso, 2014).

³⁰ Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980) and John Röhl, *The Kaiser's Personal Monarchy 1888-1900* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) and *Wilhelm II: Into the Abyss of War and Exile* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).