

Not only, but also

A short history of Honest History

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In what we might now call the First History War, during John Howard's term as prime minister, articulate conservative ideologues were encouraged to confront and oppose versions and visions of Australia's history that they found unsatisfying and, indeed, illegitimate. Individuals and institutions offering different versions of Australian history felt their ire. Many would rather forget this bruising period, and certainly do not relish reliving it; though we seem to. It might be that the group known as Honest History has coalesced at a time that might be seen as the 'phony war' of what, depressingly, may become the Second History War. With the election of Tony Abbott's government and particularly following the appointment of a combative conservative Christopher Pyne as federal Minister for Education, it seems likely that a second round of debate, discussion and argument will consume Australians who care about how their past is represented and interpreted. This time around, those who seek a principled, historically justifiable and balanced approach to interpreting the past may find resources and support thanks to the formation of the discussion and lobby group, Honest History, whose supporters will no doubt soon find themselves drawn into whatever skirmishes and clashes will come. A history of Honest History must, however, necessarily be short because the group has existed for just on a year.

Honest History is a voluntary group that coalesced in Canberra early in 2013 and quickly grew to include over 400 supporters and participants. Its core organising committee included as secretary former public servant Dr David Stephens, Michael Piggott (former Melbourne University archivist),

Richard Thwaites (former ABC correspondent), Dr Sue Wareham (of the Medical Association for the Prevention of War) and Professor Marilyn Lake of Melbourne University. I accepted the invitation to become president, on what turned out to be the spurious grounds that the role would be largely ceremonial. The group invited ‘supporters’ willing to be seen in its company and soon attracted many distinguished historians and others, including Michelle Arrow, Joan Beaumont, Frank Bongiorno, Judith Brett, Pamela Burton, Anna Clark, Ann Curthoys, Joy Damousi, Tom Griffiths, Stuart Macintyre, Mark McKenna, Tony Taylor, Christina Twomey, Ben Wellings, Richard White, Damien Williams and Clare Wright. Collectively they represent a spectrum of gender, age, experience, expertise, interest, approach and ideology, but all have endorsed the idea of speaking for a vision of Australian history, as Honest History’s mast-head puts it, ‘neither rosy glow nor black armband ... just honest’.

At first promoted by more-or-less monthly email newsletters, from late 2013 Honest History has been represented by a website (honesthistory.net.au), launched by author and journalist Paul Daley at Manning Clark House on 7 November.¹ The website, created by several volunteers (engaged retired folk of the kind who make such a contribution to community organisations, in Canberra as elsewhere), reflects the group’s commitment to diversity and open debate. It now includes over 500 items – articles, papers, and links to historical resources – with an emphasis on making challenging and diverse views available. It features ‘Jauncey’s View’, a rotating blog, named after the outspoken Australian historian Leslie Jauncey (author of *Conscription in Australia*) and his wife Beatrice, neatly allowing Jauncey bloggers to cross gender lines.

The site will grow organically, with books, articles, multimedia and relevant links contributed by supporters. Its entries are indexed under various headings, extending far beyond the categories ‘Anzac’ or ‘war history’ (where the push originated), encompassing social, economic, diplomatic, cultural and environmental history, and ‘the use and abuse of history’. Honest History will, its proponents hope, particularly support secondary history teachers seeking a wider range of perspectives in grappling with the new and challenging national curriculum. If academic historians and museum curators are the fighter aces or shock troops of the History Wars, secondary history teachers are its spear-carriers; often as bemused about what the fight is about as any hoplite

¹ Paul Daley’s speech at the launch ‘The heart of Honest History’, can be found at <http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/the-heart-of-honest-history-paul-daley/>

or conscripted legionary.² These resources include papers or items by or about commentators and historians of all kinds, conservative as well as those espousing the liberality and diversity Honest History represents; Mervyn Bendle can be found there as well as Marilyn Lake. It is already attracting both visitors and criticism – a sign of success. A Humpty Doo correspondent writing to the *Northern Territory News* in November 2013 attacked ‘Professor Joan Beaumont and her loony mates of the group Honest History’, after she spoke on ABC radio about her complex and challenging history of Australia and the Great War, *Broken Nation*.³ As one of Honest History’s goals is to encourage the public discussion of history, Honest History’s web-masters naturally placed the letter on the website and invited further comment.

Honest History does not see itself as just a website. It hopes in future to engage in and host discussions, both in person and online, and offers a rallying point or a source of support, a resource that may come to be especially useful to those considering Australian history over the course of the coming centenary of the Great War. Its supporters, those informed or encouraged by its diverse and iconoclastic attitude to the interpretation of the past, will be important not just for the practice and presentation of Australian history but for Australia’s public discussion of its past. Honest History’s supporters hope to make their collective voice heard in discussions already canvassed in its newsletters and website and in public forums. It is a loose coalition – a broad church – and its supporters, and even members of its organising committee, do not necessarily agree on everything. But, as I said in introducing Paul Daley at the 7 November launch, I suspect we all agree on one thing: history is too important to be left to ideologues – or to politicians.

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How did Honest History come to emerge in Canberra at this time? The influences operating upon it are worth reflecting on. Several strands coalesced to provide the impetus to form what has become Honest History. In no special order, it drew on the campaign run in Canberra from late 2010 against the proposal for the erection on the shore of Lake

² See Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003) and, for a revised view a decade on, Anna Clark, ‘The History Wars’, in *Australian History Now*, ed. Anna Clark and Paul Ashton (Sydney: NewSouth, 2013), 151–66.

³ Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2013).

Burley Griffin of huge concrete monoliths commemorating the two world wars. This campaign resulted in the formation of coalition of peace and heritage activists, historians and citizens – the Lake War Memorials Forum – who saw the proposal (by a private company) to build the memorials wither under the assault of critiques drawing on an intimate grasp of the relevant heritage legislation and a deep residual respect for what the Australian War Memorial (which the proposed memorial would duplicate) represented. I gave an account of the Lake War Memorials Forum’s campaign up to late 2011 in my essay ‘Monumental mistake’ in Craig Stockings’s *Anzac’s Dirty Dozen*.⁴ This campaign brought the coalition’s key members into contact.

The Lake War Memorials Forum’s campaign succeeded partly because of its members’ willingness to make common cause with seemingly unlikely allies – the Burley Griffin Society, the Medical Association for the Prevention of War and individual military historians. By late 2012, when it seemed likely that the campaign against the memorials would prevail, some members of the coalition’s informal organising committee began discussing ways to mount a critique of the Anzac legend through a television documentary funded by a competitive grants program. The application failed, but in light of the research and discussion underpinning the submission, it seemed worth finding a continuing presence for the critical views animating its proponents. They included Marilyn Lake, whose 2010 collection of essays *What’s Wrong With Anzac?* provided a catalyst for some of those concerned about the undue dominance of the Anzac legend in distorting the understanding of Australian history and skewing its teaching in schools especially.⁵

Underlying the development of the idea of Honest History was, of course, the evolution of the centenary of the Great War (aka the ‘Centenary of Anzac’) and the Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA) ‘Century of Service’ program. It grew out of a bipartisan (but heavily ideologically freighted) commission headed by former prime ministers Malcolm Fraser and Bob Hawke (and a couple of make-weights to represent so-called community sentiment). The Fraser-Hawke commission recommended a range of ways by which the centenary of the Great War might be marked. Closely managed by senior officials in the Department of Veterans’ Affairs,

⁴ Peter Stanley, ‘Monumental Mistake: Is War the Most Important Thing in Australian History?’, in *Anzac’s Dirty Dozen: 12 Myths of Australian Military History*, ed. Craig Stockings (Sydney: New South, 2012), 260–286.

⁵ Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, et al., *What’s Wrong with Anzac?: The Militarisation of Australian History* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2010).

it was mulched through a number of consultative committees providing advice (not always heeded) which produced the program announced by Julia Gillard's government in 2012.

The centenary program, big on commemorative gestures (such as the risible planned re-enactment of the departure from Albany of the first convoy in 1914) was long on ephemeral events but short on substantive and especially critical history. The sense that the centenary, and especially the officially endorsed or funded program, was likely to entrench a parochial, nationalist and sentimental view of the Great War began to attract concern among those who favoured a less parochial view of the experience and memory of war. Even more, some worried that the 'Century of Service' proposed by DVA (essentially because DVA's veteran clients were all *but* Great War veterans, and felt left out of a commemoration that did not recognise their service) would focus public attention unduly on a four-year festival of 'memorialisation', to use the bastard Americanism that has come into vogue.

And behind all of these influences we can reflect that Australia has been at war – though not exactly a nation at war – since the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in September 2001, and certainly since the commitment of Australian troops to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, conflicts about which Australians remain ambivalent. While the salutary example of the Vietnam war has rightly deterred all from projecting their opposition to the war onto those serving, unease over the fact of Australia's participation in these conflicts has led many to question the congruity between the Anzac legend and the promotion of unjustifiable wars.

All of these strands figured in prompting a small group of historians and citizens to propose a body taking an interest in, and indeed expressing concern about, the ways in which Australian history is being practised or presented. The group debated the need for and the rubric under which they might offer a coherent contribution to public debate. Though at first unduly focused on a critical view, especially of the excesses of what Geoffrey Serle called 'Anzackery' – the uncritical adulation of Anzac (a useful term Honest History has helped to resurrect and propagate) – gradually a more positive idea emerged.⁶

Through debate (most of it carried on by email) the idea of a lobby group 'Honest History' coalesced, and with it the slogan 'not only, but also'. This

⁶ James Curran and Stuart Ward reveal that Geoff Serle coined the word in his 'Austerica Unlimited' in *Meanjin* 26, no. 3 (September 1967): 237–50; *The Unknown Nation: Australia after Empire* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010), 121.

has come to be expressed as ‘not only Anzac, but also other aspects of Australian history; in war history, not only soldiers but also civilians; the home front as well as the battlefield; victims as well as slouch-hatted heroes; the negative effects of war as well as the familiar rhetoric of what war “gave” “us”’. Honest History’s essential contentions are that diversity in history is desirable, and the simplistic idea that there can or must be one view of Australian history (whatever that may be) should be resisted. Its proponents are reluctant to accept that school students need to be ‘taught’ about Australian history (instead of forming their own justifiable understandings based on the evidence). Honest History eschews dogma and is comfortable with heterodoxy. It has no 39 Articles, still less a catechism or a test of orthodoxy. It supports no single ‘line’ and remains open to where the debate about Australian history will go – as long as debate occurs.

Who is welcome to join Honest History? Actually, Honest History does not have ‘members’, but invites anyone to contribute to its website and the debate that Honest History sees as essential to a healthy public culture. Honest History’s reception seems a promising sign that historians, and indeed anyone with an interest in the ways history can be practised and represented, think that there is a need for such a group.⁷

Honest History stands for the idea that history should not be something officially endorsed or imparted, still less one interpretation endorsed or enshrined by powerful agents in our society, whether they be the federal government or one of its agencies, or a corporation with a reach based on newspaper, television or multi-media ownership. Even if the History Wars do not resume – and we can be hopeful rather than optimistic – we may have need of the ideas that Honest History articulates and the vision which it expresses: not only, but also.

⁷ Honest History’s website can be found at www.honesthistory.net.au