

# Farewell to a Friend: Stuart Macintyre, 1947– 2021

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With the death of the Australian historian Stuart Macintyre after a lengthy battle with cancer, we lost a leading historian of labour as well as a person of real stature who possessed the gifts of friendship and loyalty in abundance. He e-mailed me in early March 2020, “I have news of my own. I’ve been unwell since Christmas and medical science has discovered a cancer in a kidney... I’m one of life’s optimists and am confident”. Alas, the confidence was misplaced and he died on 22 November 2021 after a relapse.

During a two day symposium (“Remembering Stuart Macintyre”, 24–25 February 2022), speaker after speaker referred to his “enormous contribution” to the historical discipline and his “elegant prose”. Above all, they spoke of his “extraordinary generosity as a human being” and how they had “run up a great debt” for “the time he took away from his own work” when providing detailed feedback on theirs. Only 74 at the time of his death, and with so much more work planned, Stuart’s departure from this earth is a grievous loss, both personally and professionally; he left us when far too young. As a colleague lamented, “It’s hard to believe that such a vibrant presence and repository of knowledge and wisdom has gone while he still had so much to give” (Judith Smart).

Stuart will likely be best known to readers of this Bulletin for his work on British and Australian communism, yet his upbringing gave no indication of such a trajectory. Born and brought up in Melbourne and attending an exclusive private school (Scotch College), Stuart went on to the University of Melbourne and became active in the University’s Labour Club, which was followed

by tutoring and postgraduate study at Monash University across town. He was, as he later explained, “caught up with the intellectual ferment of the New Left” and he joined the Communist Party. A notable outcome of his impatience with what he regarded as “the dead weight of [historiographical] tradition” was an article on “Radical History and Bourgeois Hegemony” (1972) in an obscure journal called *Intervention*. This call for “a revolutionary break with the past”, and one that “anathematised the entire tradition of liberal empiricist historiography”, has been cited a surprising number of times to this day. But it might not have been a good idea at the time to have thrown down the gauntlet the way he did at the historical establishment. Never mind. On the back of these resounding thoughts, and with an MA safely to hand, Stuart set forth to the University of Cambridge.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, he wrote his PhD thesis on Marxist and socialist thought in Britain under the supervision of Henry Pelling, who himself had published a “historical profile” of the Communist Party of Great Britain. The eventual thesis (Eric Hobsbawm was one of the examiners) was extensively revised and published in 1980 as *A Proletarian Science*. Typical of a PhD thesis it covers a short time span (1917–33) but these were years of divisiveness and polarisation in Britain. The revisions were carried out on a research fellowship at St John’s College, Cambridge. Subtle and informed, *A Proletarian Science* stands out as a remarkable contribution to the intricacies of British understandings of Marxist thought – the rhetoric and the theory – and the philosophical aspects of socialism. His next book (*Little Moscows*, also published in 1980) touched on the same themes of communism and working-class militancy in inter-war Britain and Stuart would go on to write three more books on communism, starting with a biography of the Western Australian trade unionist Paddy Troy (*Militant*, 1984). Although Stuart left the Communist Party upon returning to Australia in 1979, communism hadn’t quite finished with him: *Militant* was followed-up, at widely spaced intervals, with a substantial two

volume history of the Communist Party of Australia ( *The Reds*, 1998; *The Party* , 2022). The latter was his last book, published shortly before he died, thus closing the circle.

While at Cambridge, Stuart met Martha Bruton, a social anthropologist; they married in 1976 and returned to Australia in 1979 when Stuart was offered a lectureship at Murdoch University in Perth. He returned to the University Melbourne the following year, thus closing another circle. He rose through the ranks, becoming the Ernest Scott Professor in 1991 and being elected the Dean of the Faculty of Arts from 1999 through to 2008. By the time of formal retirement in 2013, he was one of the university's Laureate Professors.

During his time at the University of Melbourne, Stuart wrote some 16 books in addition to *A Proletarian Science* and *Little Moscows*. There was a strong attachment to labour history ( *The Labour Experiment* , 1989) and a concern with social justice (*Winners and Losers* , 1985) and civil liberties ( *Liberty*, 2011), but his range was far greater. He was clear that he didn't want to write about something that he was not in some way part of. Hence his re-engagement with Australia resulted in a volume in *The Oxford History of Australia* (1993) and *A Concise History of Australia* (1999, and subsequent editions). His engagement with his home institution resulted in *A Short History of the University of Melbourne* (2003). The Dawkins reforms of the late-1980s and the advent of the so-called neo-liberal university, which Stuart regarded as a sorry business, found expression in the co-authored *Life after Dawkins* (2016) and *No End of a Lesson* (2017). The struggles of the social sciences to maintain a decent footing in the Australian university system, which greatly exercised Stuart, resulted in the aptly titled *The Poor Relation* (2010). Stuart moved with ease within the corridors and committee rooms of academia and he wrote with an easy familiarity of the cast of characters in *The Poor*

Relation, many of whom he knew personally.

This is by no means a complete listing of his books. There were the numerous edited collections and journal articles, which I won't even try to quantify, and he was an inveterate reviewer. He left the rest of us floundering in his wake and this reminds me of what his friend David Cannadine, himself prolifically published, said about the English historian Asa Briggs (1921–2016): “While lesser historians fiddle over footnotes, Briggs dashes off reviews; while they ruminate over reviews, he completes articles; while they agonise over articles, he manufactures books; and while they bother over books, he produces multi-volume works”. In Stuart's case, the multi-volume work was the co-edited *The Cambridge History of Australia* (2013).

Like Cannadine, Stuart was a very public-spirited academic whose services were constantly called upon by government and other outside bodies in the interests of history and of scholarship generally. One of these was the thankless task of being involved in school curriculum reform. Melanie Nolan, the General Editor of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, remarked that the ADB was seemingly the only major such organisation that Stuart did not belong to, but even then his influence was decisive. He was a Chief Investigator in an Australian Research Council LIEF [Linkage, Infrastructure, Equipment and Facilities] grant that enabled the ADB to go online and he made a submission to the Australian National University's Gregory Review in 2007 that ensured ADB's survival. He was a doughty defender of the historical profession, especially from the rough-house tactics of right-wing critics to the effect that a left-leaning historical profession is serving up “black armband history” – an excessively negative, guilt-laden and unpatriotic presentation of Australia's past. In *The History Wars* (2003), Stuart mounted a spirited defence deploring their adversarial intolerance and the consequent debasement of public life. Far from presenting a gloomy view of Australian

history, Stuart's history of the 1940s, and especially the post-War reconstruction, is a celebration of the achievement of a Labor government in making Australia a fairer and more progressive society (Australia's Boldest Experiment, 2015).

As a Young Turk at Monash University, Stuart was scornful and scathing of "the dead weight", as he saw it, of the tradition of liberal empirical historiography and he traced that odious tradition back to the second history professor at the University of Melbourne: none other than Ernest Scott. There is a touch of irony that Stuart became the Ernest Scott Professor of History in 1991 and more than a touch of irony that he chose Scott's "circumnavigation of Australian history" as the subject of his inaugural lecture. He found unexpected merit in the man and his next book was a biography of Scott, or more accurately an account of Scott's place in the "making" of Australian history ( *A History for the Nation* , 1994). On one occasion he got students to assess Scott's work as though they were doing so at the time he wrote it, and was pleased that the students were generally impressed by what Scott achieved in the circumstances of time and place. Indeed, Stuart had become more ecumenical and he now wore his theory lightly. He certainly had an attraction to archival research. He surprised me in conversation by, out of the blue, describing himself as a narrative historian and he agreed when I remarked that his interpretations were embedded in the narrative. It does not sound anything like the Young Turk of old.

Stuart wrote about Australian historians besides Scott and it was our shared interest in "telling academic lives", as I call it, that brought us together. At this point I get back to his generosity and some personal reminiscence enters the picture. On two occasions, in 2009 and again in 2015, he invited me to stay with Martha and himself when I was in Melbourne. They often had house guests, so I wasn't being given the royal treatment. I was also one of very many whose work Stuart would comment on, promptly and

incisively. Most notably in my case he commented on an earlier and a later draft of my recent book (*History Wars: the Peter Ryan – Manning Clark controversy*, 2021). He gave me his time, and lots of it. Checking my Yahoo account, I see that “You and Stuart Macintyre have traded 220 messages between Sept 2018 and Oct 2021”. It is still a strange feeling not being able to exchange mails with Stuart.

The legendary help he gave others besides myself was because he had been given considerable assistance by others along the way and, in a case of redirected reciprocity, he was returning the favour. It worked in reverse: he quizzed me by e-mails when the need arose, sent me the occasional draft of his own work, and had no compunction in suggesting to others to contact me about their own research questions. It was all about collegiality, which Stuart valued so highly. He took it as a given that we were engaged in a common enterprise, where we helped each other as a matter of course. Naturally, colleagues helped him with his last book, not least in the difficult task of locating and then getting permission to reproduce illustrative matter. And neither was Stuart mean with his money. Quite the opposite in fact, as I witnessed on more than one occasion.

A similar generosity extended to early career researchers. He invited Anna Clark to write the chapter on history in schools in *The History Wars*. She thanked Stuart “for allowing me to contribute a small portion of my own work in what has been a large portion of his”. Younger colleagues were sometimes co-opted as co-editors of the edited collections. He opened up opportunities and they were not left to do the donkey work. Rather, he was an attentive and rigorous editor, and he was rather pleased on one occasion to have been called a “syntax enforcer”.

I will miss Stuart for many things. Above all I will miss his generosity and largeness of heart.