The Australian history boom has busted, but there's hope it may boom again

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The 1850s gold rush in Victoria brought an influx of prospectors from China, seeking their fortunes. National Museum of Australia

This is the first in a series examining Australian national identity, especially around the ongoing debate about Australia Day.

Last month, my wife and I took our ten-year-old daughter to Sovereign Hill, that colourful re-creation of gold-rush Ballarat. Now almost half-a-century old, it remains a deservedly popular tourist attraction. It has also moved with the times.

There are many more knick-knacks for sale than I recall from my childhood — things have moved well beyond personalised wanted posters and boiled sweets — and it seems more representative of the history it purports to depict. The Chinese camp is striking. The creeks is kept well supplied with gold specs for the latest generation of prospectors.

Then there is the evening sound-light display, Blood on the Southern Cross, which tells story of the Eureka Stockade. It is an impressive example of technical virtuosity and storytelling.

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But as we sat watching Bentley’s Hotel being burned down, I couldn’t help but think of the overseas
visitors in the audience, many of them, I presume, from places with histories soaked in blood. What
did they make of “our own little rebellion”, as one historian has called it? Surely some must have
wondered what the fuss was all about.

In 1982, Patrick O’Farrell, a history professor at the University of New South Wales, wrote an article
for Quadrant with the intriguing title “Boredom as Historical Motivation”. It was a meandering effort,
but O’Farrell did eventually get around to his own field, Australian history. He wrote:

*This has, as a body of knowledge, a marked capacity to produce intense boredom, and thus
to spawn the historical malfunctions that boredom generates among its practitioners.*

If you consider that he was writing at a time when Australian history had made its way into every
nook and cranny of the national culture, O’Farrell’s judgement seems odd. In the 1980s Australian
history was flourishing in schools and universities. Genealogy was booming.

Australian history books did well and on occasion – as with Robert Hughes’s *The Fatal Shore* –
spectacularly. Peter Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda*, mainly set in colonial New South Wales, won a
Booker Prize.

Historians – a few of them at least – were seen frequently in the media. TV mini-series screened on a
bewildering variety of historical topics. The First Fleet re-enactment would soon be sailing into
Sydney Harbour for the Bicentenary of 1868, Coca-Cola logo and all.

O’Farrell had an answer:

*The recent swing to interest in Australian history may be, to some extent, a sign of social
malaise and vigour, of the narrow superficiality and materialism now dominant in men’s
lives.*

While I doubt that the early 1980s was notably more inclined to such vices than any other era, we can
now more easily recognise the context that produced the Australian history boom. It was part of a
declaration of independence associated with the end of the British Empire in the 1960s. There were
similar developments in Canada, New Zealand, India, the Caribbean and even, arguably, within
Britain itself, with the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism.

That era of post-imperial “new nationalism” is well behind us, but what has this meant for Australian
history? It is surely still a major presence in the public sphere. Conservatives, probably even more
than in the 1980s, worry over what is being taught in schools and universities. Manning Clark’s
Akubra has given way to Peter FitzSimons’ red bandana. Geoffrey Blainey will be quoted in the paper
on home-grown Muslim terrorism rather than, as in the 1980s, on Asian immigration.

If all of this suggests continuity – and one example of such continuity is surely the media
and publishing industries’ promotion of the Great White Man as National Historian-cum-Prophet – there
are also some obvious changes.

The space for a critical history has shrunk. Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds have *criticised* “the
militarisation of Australian history”, but the rise of Anzac is possibly as much a symptom as a cause of
this shrinkage.

Certainly, popular war stories, whether of the sentimental or the ripping Aussie yarn variety, do carry
a great deal less lead in the saddlebag when it comes to finding publishers, audiences and other forms
of public recognition. But this narrowing of focus is part of a larger shift.

The *rise* of Australian history from the 1960s to the 1980s coincided with the rise of a critical social
history, stimulated by international influences (especially British, American, Indian, French, Italian),
that gave voice and agency to women, Indigenous people, the working class, immigrants, and ethnic
and sexual minorities.
That presented the face of Australian history with a strangely divided personality. It fostered a sense of national distinctiveness and belonging, even as it drew attention to diversity, exclusion and discrimination and cast a critical eye over national stereotypes.

My feeling is that this was, and remains, a powerful creative and intellectual tension – I am thinking here of its presence in the work of Joan Beaumont on the first world war, Clare Wright on the women of Eureka, and Stuart Macintyre on the bold experiment of post-war reconstruction: all award-winning authors and books of recent years.

Meanwhile, for those of us working in universities, there is the problem of getting bums on seats. The space occupied in the 1980s media by the Great White Male Historian-Prophet is increasingly now the property of international relations scholars, anti-terrorism specialists and security experts – although they’re still usually white blokes.

History, like several other humanities and social science disciplines, bleeds enrolments to international relations, which many students see as more “relevant” to their world and a smoother pathway to a “global” career – as well as being more in line with their increasingly mobile lives and cosmopolitan identities.

All the same, I was interested in the conversation I overheard between a young woman and a sales assistant in a Ballarat bookshop. The woman – probably in her twenties – had clearly enjoyed the Chinese camp at Sovereign Hill: did the store have anything on the Chinese in Australia?

The assistant couldn’t really suggest a title; clearly, the large collection of popular military histories on the shelf wasn’t going to be much help. The last time I spotted her she was thumbing through a copy of Geoffrey Blainey’s latest.

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