

POPULARIZING THE HUMANITIES.

As a semi-licensed advocate for humanities research and a professional historian, I'm used to copping a good deal of public and private scepticism. Some of it comes from politicians, businessmen, and university administrators who claim that our research is too rarified to be supported by the public purse, and some from fellow humanists who say we are being betrayed by crass commercialism and philistine government agendas. Scholars who have devoted lifetimes to research in subjects like archaeology, history, languages, literature and philosophy, and whose achievements are hailed internationally, can't fathom why they should be so undervalued at home, especially when compared with their counterparts in science and technology. Young researchers in the humanities and social sciences struggle to get their ideas into print because of the decay of scholarly publishing in this country. I share this frustration.

The most persistent popular accusation is, of course, that we professional scholars live in ivory towers, talk exclusively to each other, and use a language of abstraction that no-one else can understand. Critics say our work will remain undervalued until we learn to disseminate it in forms a general public can appreciate. The discipline of history is said to be case in point. Australian bookshops are crammed with best-selling histories from overseas academics, such as Dava Sobel's Longitude and Simon Winchester's Surgeon of Crowthorne. Our prime-time television resonates with the nerdy syllables of Princeton's Simon Schama on 'The History of Britain', but where are the Australian equivalents? Geoffrey Blainey, Stuart Macintyre and Henry Reynolds are having to carry us all. We Australian academics relished writing reviews of Robert Hughes's The Fatal Shore under catty titles like 'The Shock of the Old': still, why wasn't it one of us, rather than an expatriate art journalist, who wrote what proved to be the most widely-read work of Australian history of the twentieth century?

True, accusations like these are often travesties: popularisers are rightly suspected in Academe because they often plunder the hard-won work of scholars without proper acknowledgment. I have twice had my work plagiarized in this way and it's not pleasant. Nor can all our research be produced in popular or accessible form without distorting its meaning. Like scientists, we sometimes have to use complex technical

methods, deploy abstract theories and mobilize specialized vocabularies in order to pioneer new knowledge.

Even so, I think that many of us would now concede that these populist critics have a point. I've been a historian for more than thirty years, and up until a few years ago I've never consciously tried to write a trade book — in part because I didn't know how and in part because I was scared to leave the safety net provided by my academic peers. Recently I've had a go and I have to say that I loved doing it. I was goaded into the attempt by a challenge from a former American publisher who is now a literary agent in New South Wales. She believes that this country is full of talent and she wants to make true stories by Australians a global rather than purely local attraction. Only in this way, she argues, can we overcome the economic limitations imposed by our tiny population. In fact, she argues, we must go further still: if professional historians are serious about reviving and extending the popular reach of our discipline, they must master the visual communication forms that have colonized the imaginations of the young, particularly digital media.

So, around two years ago, at much the same time as I began writing my first would-be popular book, I also became involved in a series of BBC Television history productions, both as a behind-the-scenes historical adviser and a commentator in front of the camera. My talk tonight is about the pleasures and perils of these popularizing experiences.

I.

My trade book, The Seven Ordeals of Count Cagliostro, published in the US and Australia by Harper Collins, has been out a few months now. It's about an eighteenth-century imposter, healer, magician and freemason from the slums of Sicily who became the most infamous European alive on the eve of the French Revolution. The challenge was to produce a work of historical scholarship that could also grip non-specialized readers — that could entertain as well as instruct. It had to have an argument, because all art and science must have that, but it could not be didactic or over-analytical. I had to induce an unknown audience to read my book quite differently way from the way my previous scholarly books have been read, if at all. I had to try to persuade a mob of

strangers from a variety of countries to pay for the book and to read it hungrily from beginning to end, eager to turn each page and to know what happened in the end.

For this I found I had relearn the arts of story-telling. Narrative is the oldest of the historian's tools, yet for many years it's been in low demand in the academy. Our models are generally associated with the social sciences or with literary and aesthetic theory. Either way, we emphasise inquiry and analysis at the expense of narration and character. In the process I fear we might have lost touch with the heart of our discipline. My kindly American editor sent back the first draft of The Seven Ordeals with the words, "Now here is Iain McCalman's eighth ordeal — to turn a rich study into a compelling story".

To my alarm, he wanted me to fly in the face of some of the insights and approaches that I, as a professional cultural historian, hold dear. In order to realize a complete historical world for my readers, he said, I must learn to paint word pictures as if I had actually witnessed the events. In order to achieve a complete suspension of disbelief, I must not soar into abstract analysis, or assume prior knowledge in the reader, or cast any doubts on the reliability of my sources. I must work chronologically rather than thematically. I must produce a rounded historical life, however complex or haphazard that life might have been, yet I must never be boring, repetitive or anti-climatic: suspense must be sustained until the last page. Most affronting of all, I must speak — it seemed — with the certainty of a god figure who knew exactly what had happened in the past, or, as we professionals would say, I must write as a naïve positivist who believes in the complete objectivity and fixity of historical fact.

I almost gave up at this point. The cost of popularizing seemed too high. Did I have to gloss over history's inevitable partiality and incompleteness? Did I have to give up representing the multiplicity of perspectives or voices that are always possible in any historical account? Did I have to lose my sense of the contingency, ambivalence and uncertainty that surround human motive and behaviour? Moreover, a life history of Cagliostro offered special problems for such a would-be story-teller. To the French and Russian monarchies and the Roman Inquisition, and others besides, Cagliostro had been the Osama Bin Laden of the eighteenth century. On two separate occasions he'd been interrogated in prison for months on end. Teams of specialists had swarmed around Europe gathering information about his doings — so, not only was the archive massive,

it was also unremittingly hostile. Almost every fact known about Cagliostro comes from his enemies.

After much agonizing, I hope I came up with a structure that preserved the suspense and pace of a story without compromising some of my core beliefs about what a historian can truthfully say about the past. Making the most of the hostile sources, I presented Cagliostro's life through sequential encounters with mighty opponents such as Catherine the Great, Count Casanova and Marie-Antoinette. Through the eyes of these, some of the ancien regime's most powerful and representative individuals, I tried to reveal why an obscure Italian charlatan could provoke such fear and hate. In the process of these encounters I showed Cagliostro turning himself into, and being treated as, seven different versions of magical menace. To one enemy he was a dangerous freemason, to another an evil necromancer, to another again, a vile religious heretic. I hoped that within the interstices of these hostile and conflicting evaluations a complex personality might emerge. Here was Cagliostro warts and all, a man operating within the constraints and possibilities of his times. My readers could act as the jury and make up their own minds whether or not he deserved the opprobrium of history. They could decide whether he was a Robin Hood figure, a swindling charlatan, or a magical genius. And I'm pleased to say that judgements have varied widely.

In the end, my American publishers accepted this unorthodox structure but not without resistances which brought home to me some of the serious costs of popularising. They were troubled by my ambiguity, and pressed me to make a more emphatic commitment against Cagliostro. They, and it has to be admitted some reviewers since, retained a persistent confusion as to whether I was writing history or fiction. They didn't understand that my dialogue and descriptions were taken strictly from primary sources and couldn't be altered to improve the story. They seemed baffled when I refused to change quoted words to make them more suspenseful, euphonious or – with the puritanism of Americans – less coarse. On one occasion, for example, they wanted me to change the word *arse* to *derriere*: Cagliostro would have died laughing at such tweekiness.

And though it was exhilarating for an obscure scholar to have the support of the giant public relations and marketing machines of the largest press in the world, I quickly discovered some brutal realities. Several months before publication my editor failed to

persuade the marketeers in his own company that an unknown Australian author and an eighteenth-century Italian crook, well-known only in Europe, were worthy of serious investment. Without consultation, they cut the US print-run in half, withdrew it from the big book chains, and insisted on a title change to The Last Alchemist that made nonsense of my structure. They then came up with a matching cover-image of a wizened alchemist with bubbling alembic and long white beard. It was only when I fumed that Cagliostro was more like Tony Soprano than Merlin the Wizard that I managed to redeem the cover. As for the title, it joined a string of ‘last magicians’, ‘last sorcerers’ and ‘last cabbalists’ that already featured on American publishing lists. The message was clear: whether in books or films, the mass market shuns originality and difference. Afraid to jeopardize its investment, it seeks out the well-trodden path, the previously confirmed winner. This is the harshest lesson that a would-be popularizer must learn.

I suppose Cagliostro’s career is not quite over yet. The book has sold reasonably well in the more sympatico editions and environments of Australia and Britain, and it’s currently being translated into Japanese, German, Korean, Portuguese and Bulgarian. There is some Hollywood film interest, a play is in train, and I’ve had a firm offer for an off-Broadway musical. All this brings its excitements. Still, I’m not the dewy-eyed innocent of a year ago: I look on all these developments warily, sensing that ahead lie both creative pleasures and a tough tussles as each new medium works to impose its distinctive generic blueprint on a product that I thought was my own.

II

In different ways, my new-found venture into popularising history via television has proved to be an equally ambivalent experience. Some of you might know, for example, that I signed up in August 2001 as a historical adviser for, and participant in, a BBC 2 Television re-enactment of the first voyage of Captain Cook from Cairns to Indonesia. The series has been shown in varying forms in Britain, the United States and Australia under the title of ‘The Ship’. Our director Chris Terrill called the genre ‘Extreme History’, in which twenty-first century individuals would try to simulate the intellectual, psychic and physical challenges of famous past achievements. It did not take

me long to discover, however that the series should really have been called 'Big Brother at Sea'. From the outset the impulse to test the mettle of the volunteers in accordance with the voyeuristic conventions of reality TV prevailed over the potentially compelling intellectual and historical inquiries that might have been launched.

It was not just that the experience was far more harrowing than my middle-aged body had expected. We had to eat hard tack biscuits that broke our teeth, sleep like a putrid bat colony in layers of stifling hammocks, clamber to terrifying heights up the rigging and perch out on thin spars with the sea swirling below and our backs twitching in pain as we hauled on heavy canvas sails. We had to pee over the side in public and wash ourselves by up-ending bags of cold sea water on our heads. Toughest of all, we had to forego the fleshly consolations of tobacco, alcohol and caffeine. Some of you might have seen my petulant mutiny over the wet washing in the first episode, though in my defence it was not as trivial an issue as the film made out because sleeping in damp clothes contributed to one historian having to be helicoptered off the Ship with severe pneumonia. Yet even this hardship would have been acceptable enough had we been taken seriously as historians.

Alone of the group of experts on board, who included botanists, astronomers and navigators, we historians had to serve as full-time able seaman. This deprived us of cabins in which to sleep and a time and space for our work, though we did eventually get the latter after a collective mutiny. We were allocated a tiny hold for spare sails and some occasional spots of time to study our books in between ship maintenance chores. And although we were trotted out to answer predictable questions in front of the camera, this was largely a form of lip-service — the use of talking historical heads to provide a veneer of authority. We were never asked what substantive historical insights we might offer. I'm not complaining here about the lack of scholarly authenticity in the enterprise: we accepted that the series was designed to reach a popular audience, many of whom knew next to nothing about Cook and his voyage. No, my gripe is about the tragic opportunity that was lost to capture a series of vivid, dramatic interplays between the past and present. There is a living membrane between then and now:: making use of it would have produced better history and better television

We historians quickly discovered, for example, the terrible corrosive power of what Cook called nostalgia, and we knew as homesickness. In Cook's day nostalgia was thought to be a physical disease that could cause sailors to go crazy and harm themselves. Cook's journals told us that the disease afflicted his men only after many months of voyaging, in part because it was alleviated by liberal quantities of grog, tobacco and coffee, consolations that were banned on our ship. Perhaps a result, black nostalgia hit us after only three days. Everyone was gripped by an aching longing to return to some imagined scene of home— somewhere far from the Ship. And all of us, without exception, talked incessantly about our longing for a proper bed, a full night's sleep, and decent food. One person, an FBI agent as it happens, was only able to take two days of this before she cracked and asked to be taken ashore, completely shell-shocked by the alien experience. None of this intense emotional drama was interrogated or captured by the film-makers.

And then there was sex. What an opportunity for ratings was lost here, and I don't mean just in the usual voyeuristic Big Brother mode. Sex was a real issue on board these crowded floating dormitories during voyages that could last for two years or more. Sexual tensions ran like a dark undercurrent through Cook's Endeavour voyage. They surfaced, however, in one incident almost exactly where our own television voyage began. Drunk with celebrating the sight of land near Yarraba, Cook's clerk Dick Orton awoke to find that someone had cut off both his clothing and the tops of his ears. And it turned out not to be first time, at least with regard to his clothes. Reading between the lines of Cook's journals, it seems that two young midshipmen were competing for the love of Orton, and that he was tormenting them both. He lost half his ears for his pains and one of the midshipman deserted at Batavia in order to escape Cook's examination into the incident. Needless to say there were modern-day parallels on our ship, particularly since we were carrying more men than women. But because the historians were not consulted about the social dynamics of Cook's voyage, this chance to make fascinating comparisons between his voyage and ours was squandered.

But the most important opportunity to meld the dramas of past, present and future occurred at Cooktown. As you will know, it was here, following the holing of the Endeavour on the reef, that Cook and his men spent their longest period on Australian

soil while they repaired the ship. Here is where they engaged, traded with and fought with the indigenous people of Australia. From one view, this was literally the beachhead landing of British imperialism, prior to the full-scale later invasion of the continent in 1788. Here is how I described our visit there in my journal of 31 Aug. 2001

.... When we landed, there were three locals waiting for us. Eric Deeral, an elder of the Guugu-Yimithir people led the discussion... He spoke movingly about the way his first sight of the Endeavour replica in the mouth of the river had been painful and overpowering. He felt a direct frisson of empathy with his ancestors across the centuries as they had stood on Grassy Knoll and viewed the strange spectacle of the three-masted barque on the sea below. He and his clan group, the Gamay Warra are part of the black cockatoo totem and a subset of the Guugu-Yimithir. He had painstakingly assembled a set of portfolios concerned with forwarding their land-rights claim to the surrounding district of Cooktown in the teeth of fierce opposition from local whites.

It is thanks in part to the journals of Cook and his men, that the Guugu Yimithir of Hopevale were in 1997 the first Aboriginal people to be given legal recognition and ownership of their lands under the new Native Title act that followed the Mabo case. What a lovely irony that Cook's Endeavour invasion should now be seen as an ambassador of cultural renewal rather than solely a harbinger of destruction. And it was clear that for Eric and his colleagues our own visit was both a re-encounter with the past and an engagement with the present. Our presence was helping to send a message to the European locals of Cooktown who persisted in trying to marginalise the indigenous people of the district. Moreover, the Guugu Yimithir understanding of the history of Cook's visit was nuanced and realistic. They didn't gloss over the destructiveness and tragedy of what ensued, but thanks to their studies they no longer had a visceral hatred of Cook and his men. After all, in a sense they were now helping to repair some of the damage that the visit had unwittingly begun long ago. What a theme: it should have been the theme of the series, and it was never mentioned.

By contrast with this rather disillusioning TV experience I have recently also worked as historical consultant for a BBC 2 historical drama-in-progress on the life of Emma Hamilton, Lord Nelson's ravishing, monstrous and tragic mistress. 'Victory', as the series is presently called, will to be screened in 2005 for the bicentenary of Trafalgar. What was different and exciting about the process of generating this particular series was that the Director, Mike Dormer, loves history. Not only was my contribution sought from

the earliest gestation of the idea, but the BBC writer, Gwyneth Hughes, also took the trouble to read a swag of secondary sources in preparation. The BBC took our collaboration seriously enough to send her out to Australia for ten days, enabling us to undertake intensive reading, discussion, and debate before we hammered out a rough treatment that we both liked. Even though this series-in-progress is not a documentary, I think it will be better history and television than 'The Ship'. What it shows is that the two imperatives of popularizing and scholarship are not necessarily incompatible, though of course our creative collaboration may still be snuffed out during the many later interventions that will occur in the actual filming, editing and production.

Currently, I'm working on several historical projects with ABC Television, and once again I feel like a warier and wiser man after my first mixed experiences of TV popularisation. Obviously there are dozens of ways that professional historians can be deployed to make TV histories. We can be asked to play the satirist or the seer, the clown or the talking head; we can be advisers, researchers or writers; we can use traditional or innovative communicative techniques. And although I have been arguing that we should seek and embrace every reasonable opportunity to broaden the appeal of our discipline, I am equally adamant that we mustn't undervalue our skills and contributions. Above all, we must ensure that our intellectual property is both fully utilized and properly credited. We are professionals with hard-won skills and unique assemblages of knowledge. Believe it or not, the commercial market needs us, for we are originators and crafters of new ideas. Popularising will only succeed in the long run if the stories used are genuinely original or at least newly envisaged. That is our special talent. Let's make sure it's not squandered.