

○ WRITING **HISTORIES**

IMAGINATION AND NARRATION

EDITED BY **ANN CURTHOYS** AND **ANN MCGRATH**

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© Mandy Martin and Tom Griffiths. Detail from *Flood below the Shearing Shed*. 16 February. 1999. Oil, ochre, pigment on linen. 90x330 cms. The painting is from the environmental project: Watersheds; the Paroo to the Warrego 1999.
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A note about pagination and chapter identification

Page numbers in this book do not run consecutively across chapters. Instead, page numbering restarts on the first page of each chapter and is prefaced by the chapter number. Thus 01.1 is chapter 1, page 1; 01.2 is chapter 1, page 2; 02.1 is chapter 2, page 1; 02.2 is chapter 2, page 2; and so on.

In the Table of Contents, each chapter is listed with its chapter number (01, 02, 03, etc.) only.

This system, in which page numbering is self-contained within each chapter, allows the publisher, Monash University ePress, to publish individual chapters online.

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○ PREFACE TO THE ELECTRONIC EDITION

We are delighted that Monash University ePress is republishing *Writing Histories: Imagination and Narration* as a print and an e-book. Electronic publication will enable it to reach a larger audience. We are grateful to Monash Publications in History for publishing the book in the first place. Since that time, it has reached a diverse audience. This is so, we think, because there are few books quite like this one. There are many guides to writing history essays and theses, and to writing particular kinds of history—family, local, church, and company history, to mention those most likely to attract writing guides—but there are few that aim to assist in the writing of general and academic histories. We hope this republication assists a new generation of budding historians to participate in the adventure of mind and imagination that is the writing of history.

We have updated the reading guide and bibliography to include material published since the book's first edition. In Australia and internationally, the discipline has undergone many significant changes since 2000, including the 'history wars', the debates around history and fiction prompted by Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, and the moves towards transnational history. The reading guide now includes some of the main texts from these developments. It also has several books that have appeared since their authors reflected in this volume on the writing challenges they presented.

Finally, we note with great sadness the passing of one of our contributors, Greg Denning, in 2008. Greg had a long and distinguished career as an historian of international reputation, but we knew him mainly towards the end of his career, when he conducted many workshops for PhD students at the Australian National University and elsewhere. He inspired his students, and indeed his peers, to have faith in their projects, believe in the value of history generally, realise that historical writing is always a performance, and aim high in their writing. We dedicate this electronic edition of *Writing Histories: Imagination and Narration* to him.

Ann Curthoys
Sydney, February 2009

Ann McGrath
Canberra, February 2009

○ INTRODUCTION

Ann Curthoys
Ann McGrath

This collection of essays is designed to help anyone wanting to write histories that capture the imagination and challenge the intellect. In an effort to uncover the mystery of what it is that makes some histories fascinating and others rather dull, nine historians reflect here on their own practice as writers. All work in Australia and most write in the field of Australian history, but the ideas, techniques and reflections can be applied to any kind of history, written anywhere.

For historians today, both those starting out and those experienced in the older habits of unselfconscious 'writing up', there are many difficult and interesting writing questions to be faced. This book explores some of the most common: how to get started, how to find a 'voice', how to enliven a description or a narration, where to write, how to keep going, and finally how to know when to stop.

There are innumerable 'how to' books for hopeful and practising fiction writers, with advice on questions of plot, character and style, and on how to publish and market your work. There are also many guides to thesis-writing for Honours, Masters and PhD students, whose work forms a major part of historical research and writing today. In addition, there is a flourishing genre in which historians reflect on their work, methods, analysis, intentions, and approach to history.¹ There are, however, few books focussing on problems of form and writing in history, or in which historians reflect *as writers* on their work. History students in universities are taught how to construct a good written argument; essay questions are devised to assess how well they can digest, synthesise, and test a hypothesis. Students are, however, rarely taught ways in which to make their work exciting, dramatic, moving.

This neglect of the intricacies and techniques of the specific art of historical writing springs from the idea that while fiction writers can allow free play for the imagination, history writers are confined by their commitment to historical truth. In this mode of thinking, there is no point worrying about questions of plot and character and point of view, for the historian cannot invent, and must simply write about what he or she finds in the records. There is no real art in history-writing, except to be clear and straightforward, and perhaps well-paced. Thus history writers will tend to see themselves as historians rather than as writers, as 'writing up' their research rather than as imaginative and creative writers out to capture the interest of an audience.

In our view, a more helpful way of thinking about history-writing is to see it as seeking one kind of truth, while fiction seeks another. In both cases, forms of writing must be found to suit the writer's purposes, and in both cases it is important to write well—to inspire, entice, inform, to draw the reader into an adventure of thought.

Our interest in the specifics of history-writing—in questions of technique, form, and creativity—is part of a broader change of mood amongst historians. Under the influence of postmodernism, or the 'linguistic turn', many historians have been drawn to seeing historical documents and sources as texts, whose meaning must be deciphered in the context of an understanding of intertextuality, genre and discourse. In this atmosphere of heightened sensitivity to textuality, many historians have become more conscious of the texts they themselves create. Most influential in this recognition (or more properly rediscovery) of historical writing *as* writing, as a form of creativity and textuality, has been the work of Hayden White.² In works such as *Tropics of Discourse* and *The Content of the Form*, White has explored the ways in which historians tell stories. Events, he says, are made into a story by processes of suppression or subordination, which highlight characterisation, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, and descriptive strategies—that is, by a variety and armoury of story-telling techniques. The relationships that *appear* to be inherent in the objects inhabiting the field have been imposed by the investigator.³ Historians, White says, place their historical information in plot-structures that arise from the accumulated conventions of story-telling, not from the events themselves. The problem is, they rarely realise this is what they are doing. It is a 'fiction' of historians that what they constitute as the beginning or the end of their story are all *real* beginnings or endings, rather than literary constructions.

One does not have to adopt fully White's particular theory of story-telling—he outlines a limited number of main story-types, such as tragedy, comedy, romance, satire and epic—to take his key point: that historians, in constructing an historical narrative, are writing *narrative*. They are deciding what story to tell, and their material offers much more than one possibility. Yet White's emphasis on the constructedness of historical writing has proved controversial, enraging many historians who prefer to emphasise the histories they discover rather than those they create. White has, however, inspired many others, who recognise in his work a description of their own experience of deciding how to tell their story from the historical material they have collected.

White's emphasis on history as story-telling is, of course, not at all new. History was once very conscious of itself as a story-telling craft, and eighteenth-century historians prided themselves on their style, happy to foreground their role as authors, story-tellers

and writers. It was only later, under the influence of nineteenth-century desires for science, and with it a single version of the facts—the past, the ‘truth’—that the notion of the art of writing tended to fade from historians’ consciousness and desires. The leading advocate of history as a science in the nineteenth century was German historian Leopold von Ranke. Ranke was appalled by Walter Scott’s extremely popular historical novels, especially their historical inventions, and he resolved in his own work to avoid all imagination and restrict himself severely to the facts, to show only what actually happened. By the end of the century the split between history and literature had become an orthodoxy among professional historians. History, proclaimed the Professor of History at Cambridge, J.B. Bury, in his inaugural lecture in 1903, ‘is a science, no less and no more ... History is not a branch of literature’.⁴

In the twentieth century this divorce from an interest in the art of story-telling was further strengthened by the influence of structuralism, with people as diverse as Lewis Namier, R.H. Tawney and Fernand Braudel arguing that it was the duty of historians to analyse structures rather than narrate events. In the 1980s, however, under the influence of post-structuralist critiques of the notion of ‘structure’ itself, events, and with them narrative, began to make a comeback. Many historians sought to avoid the opposition between structure and event altogether, preferring to investigate particular events for what they reveal about the social structure and the culture in which they took place.⁵ With this renewed emphasis on events, and the greater claims made for them as windows on the past, there had to be greater attention to the arts of description and narration, and to drawing connections between the particular and the general.

There also had to be attention to technical issues such as ‘voice’ and point of view, matters familiar to writers of fiction but less so to writers of history. The most difficult of these questions was that of what kind of authorial voice to adopt. Should one do the usual thing and write in an impersonal ‘third person’ way, acting as a hidden narrator who knows everything that happened and the reasons it happened the way it did, but never show one’s own face? This, after all, is what most of us were taught to do at school and university: never use ‘I’, history students have been told for generations, and in many cases are still told ‘we are not interested in you, only in the story you tell’. As Tom Griffiths remarks in this volume, ‘using the personal pronoun is seen to be self-indulgent and unscholarly’. The advice to avoid ‘I’ fits well with the desire to ‘sound objective’. We all know well the kind of history thus produced, and anyone who has written a history essay, thesis, or article knows how to write this way.

Should one venture into more personalised interactive territory, unafraid to say ‘I’ when necessary, mixing the usual third person narrative style with a first person discussion of the processes of research and interpretation? In postmodern histories, there is a return to the use of ‘I’, to foregrounding the twists and turns of historical research and the fact of multiple possible interpretations. There is, that is to say, a return to an emphasis on the uncertainty of our knowledge about the past, and on the ways in which our conceptions of the past are embedded in our present. Using ‘I’ thus reminds the reader that this history has an author, and has involved a myriad of choices and selections at every step. It is also a means of creating interest; the ‘I’ voice is very powerful, as the popularity and accessibility of autobiography and oral history attests. The return to ‘I’ thus signifies a desire to engage with popular audiences, to recognise that to narrate is also to perform. The authors in this book do not all agree on the return of the ‘I’, Bill Gammage in particular regarding it as unnecessary and intrusive, and the avoidance of ‘I’ as indicating an appropriate historical humility. In his case he aims ‘not to intrude into the story’, or rather ‘not to make intrusion obvious, to let the story unfold as seemingly it did at the time’. Ann McGrath draws attention both to the possibilities of the ‘I’, and the ways in which its overuse or misuse can have the opposite effect to that intended.

A related issue is the discussion by some authors of ways in which to convey multiple perspectives. Many historians now want to show that the past looked very different to different actors at the time, and since. In this volume Donna Merwick draws our attention to Walter Benjamin’s critique of history as a story of progress, and his attention to those who, ‘amid the “deafening” voices of the victors, are reduced to silence’. How are we to convey this multiplicity of voices, and how can we leave some interpretative work to the reader, without becoming hopelessly indecisive and confusing? Various techniques have been explored. One approach is that of Caribbean historian Richard Price in his book, *Alabi’s World*, and in parts of his later book, *The Convict and the Colonel*, where different points of view are represented with a different type face.⁶ In his essay ‘History of Events and the Revival of Narrative’, Peter Burke suggests that historians still have a great deal to learn from the great modernist novelists like James Joyce, with their experimentation with various forms of narration. Historians, he suggests, could learn to play with chronology and sequence, as Aldous Huxley did in *Eyeless in Gaza*, or with multiple points of view, like Lawrence Durrell in *The Alexandria Quartet*. Yet not all novelistic techniques, such as ‘stream of consciousness’, he warns, are open to the historians.⁷

Greg Denning suggests that we see writing as a kind of performance, intended to be read aloud and in public, as well as silently and privately. In the spirit of the old adage

'show, don't tell', he urges history writers that their 'story-telling should be so skilful that we don't have to say what it means ... If we go to the theatre, we don't expect the playwright to appear on the stage and tell us what the play means'. Narrative and analysis should be blended together. Denning also gives some very practical advice, as in his suggestion to avoid quoting in indented paragraphs, as people don't read them, and instead of writing captions to illustrations, to 'wrap them around with discursive texts ... [to] make image essays'. He also emphasises the importance of rewriting, both the individual sentence and the entire manuscript.

One major influence on historical discussion of questions of form has been James Clifford and George E. Marcus' collection, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, in which they draw attention to the narrative shape of modern ethnographies, where the ethnographer appears as the hero of his (or her) own tale, the discoverer of the secrets of another culture.⁸ In response, some anthropologists have experimented with other forms of writing, foregrounding the particular context of their ethnographic research, and the processes through which they came to the understandings they did. Ethnography now had to be written not for an 'objective' and unmarked outside world, but in such a way that its subjects might read and interrogate it. Some historians realised that they too often write like Clifford and Marcus' ethnographers, asserting their mastery over the entire society they describe, hiding their own processes of research, reflection and interpretation. Using historical rather than fieldwork materials for their sources, some historians wish to adopt the methods of postmodern ethnography.

One of our contributors, the anthropologist and historian Deborah Bird Rose, goes a little further, not only applying to history some ideas from postmodern ethnography but also reflecting on the way in which her own ethnographic research in the Victoria River District led her to explore questions of place, time and history. She discusses how, in writing *Hidden Histories*, she sought 'a complex weaving of voices and subject positions', and a subject position for herself that was dialogical and open-ended.⁹ In her book, *Country of the Heart*, she works with several narrative strands, including her own text, her Aboriginal co-authors' strand, and her photographer's strand.

For many new writers, and even for experienced ones, the hardest task is to start, to find the voice, style, purpose, and argument that will sustain the historical text they are creating. Inspiration for writing history can come from many sources. Peter Read explores music as a model for writing, in particular the 'fantasy', a free but brief improvisation popular in the Elizabethan age. He is fascinated by Purcell's fantasy for five viols, 'Upon One Note', for its balanced form, emotional peaks, exuberance, compression and elegance.

John Docker describes the process whereby his 1492: *The Poetics of Diaspora* moved from 'a mere gleam in its creator's eye' to a completed book. His intellectual journey moves from Said to Joyce, Sir Walter Scott to Walter Benjamin, and he aims to 'to take risks, make sideways moves, go over the top and keep going, journey deep within oneself. One has to cultivate method as a kind of art of madness'.

In trying to find new ways to write history, some historians have had to think more deeply about literary techniques, the creation of interest and understanding via figures of speech such as metaphor, metonymy and simile. Where literary critics track these rhetorical figures in literary texts as a matter of course, historians have little in their training to help them recognise, much less self-consciously use, such techniques. Which is not to say they don't use figures of speech. Metaphor, as Anthony Easthope has shown, is used by historians all the time—to imply social fluidity or rigidity, fast or slow moving historical change, mechanical or organic forms of connectedness, and the like.¹⁰ But they use them unwittingly, with little understanding of the ambiguity and intertextuality of metaphors—as if the metaphor pins down a meaning rather than multiplying the possible meanings of any statement. A clearer understanding of the nature and effects of metaphor might help historians write in more engaging and complex ways. Historians do the same thing in their use of allegory and the anecdote, deploying them unselfconsciously and unreflectively. Very often, in looking for beginnings and origins, they are telling particular kinds of creation stories, with all the features of these, whether religious or scientific, but they do not recognise or understand the nature of the genre within which they work. Knowledge of genre, figures of speech, and rhetorical traditions can help us all become more skilled writers.

It was with issues like these in mind that we ran a three-week course for PhD students in history and related fields in April 1999. The course was funded by the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University, who paid the students' fares and accommodation in Canberra. Fourteen students from around the country—from Perth, Darwin, Sydney, Melbourne, Wollongong and Canberra—attended the course. In the first week we raised the theoretical and aesthetic questions alluded to above, and many others. We also set some 'loosening up' writing exercises, two of them based on visits to art galleries, inviting students to take a painting as a starting point for writing. In the middle week, students concentrated on their own writing for their theses, and attended talks by practising historians, many of them reproduced here. In the final week, the students' work was workshopped intensively. At the same time, there was a number of excursions to the bush and lakes around Canberra.

The students' reaction was extraordinarily positive. PhD students are often extremely isolated and have very little opportunity to discuss their work in detail with others. They have even less opportunity to discuss the huge writing task that lies before them, to see the writing task as a form of creative writing that can be pleasurable as well as somewhat painful, so large and unfamiliar as the task is for most. A collective enterprise, in which their own and similar writing tasks became the focus of discussion, provided many with new insights and new impetus. In their journals and short exercises, they wrote comments like the following:

Sue Hardisty: I am relieved the first week is over. I feel exhausted and exhilarated. I want to wallow in the lingering sensation of the first week's immersion ritual. A sea of words sweeping over me and a wave of voices whispering, the same message in exciting ways ... 'form needs to be challenged to write a different history'. I feel I have permission to speak ... to explore ways of writing history.

Bill Wilson (at the end of one writing exercise): I would not normally write in such a way. This piece is totally free of my normal writing styles and conventions. In the context of the program and a desire to experiment I have taken a risk.

Unknown: Tom [Griffiths] made the point that historians are also writers. Had to stop and think about that for a minute, but he is right, must remember the point.

Bernie Brian: As a student from a smaller regional university, I feel the biggest disadvantage we have is a limited contact with the larger community of scholars ... While I had always considered myself a reasonable writer, I had never considered myself to be 'a writer' ... The [Visiting Scholars Program] has both inspired me and given me the confidence to redefine myself as a writer and for the first time to see that there may be life after the PhD ... The most important ideas that I took away with me were to not be shy about writing my 'book' creatively and to let my sources speak for themselves. I always felt I needed to come up with some holistic, authoritative, single meaning for my subject matter. In short, I feel I no longer have to be afraid of contradiction ... I came away with a decision to describe and analyse

the events associated with my historical subject, without the overriding urge to make connections that may not even exist.

Ann Standish: My academic training insists that I make clear the connections between the several trains of thought that have travelled through this piece ... my academic training is also screaming out against not only the use of the first person narrator, but also against allowing it to dominate the narrative. I fear an audience will find it dull, indulgent, lacking in internal coherence, and probably too long. I regret that I haven't written something more experimental, more amusing, more entertaining, less earnest. But now it is too late.

Michael Adams: Words can only be one part of how I describe the places in my work. Linking the words with maps, photographs, other images—within the limitations of an academic work—is an unresolved challenge. I'd like my thesis to look like a John Wolsley painting: maps, sketches, illuminating diary notes, diagrams, detail studies, broad landscapes, all combined in one huge and arresting composition that you can explore close-up and also understand in its unified totality.

While residential courses like this one are expensive, non-residential courses can be offered in any city with a significant number of students or others writing history. We hope this book will be useful for people wanting to offer similar courses, whether at universities or in community colleges of various kinds. With this aim in mind, we have included, alongside the chapters in which historians discuss their own writing practices, two further chapters intended for the teacher or the self-managed history-writing group. 'How to workshop your writing' explains how to set up and manage supportive writing environments, equipping history writers with friendly critics who can enrich and empower their writing, and help them realise goals from which they might otherwise shy away. 'Gallery, museum and other exercises for writing history' describes techniques we have used ourselves, which students have found useful.

Many PhD students, and many historians, however, will continue to write in relative isolation. This book is also intended for them. Those writing alone may find the 'Reading guide and bibliography' at the end of the book especially useful. Finally, while many readers may wish to read the chapters 'magpie fashion', they do follow sequentially and are best read in the order they have been presented.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ We list some of these books in the reading guide and bibliography at the end of the book.
- ² See especially his *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1973; *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1978; and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1987.
- ³ H. White, 'The Literary Text as Literary Artifact', in R. Canary and H. Kozicki (eds), *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1978, pp. 41–62, especially pp. 45–49.
- ⁴ J.B. Bury, *Selected Essays of J.B. Bury*, edited H. Temperley, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1930, p. 4.
- ⁵ P. Burke, 'History of Events and the Revival of Narrative', in P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 234–37.
- ⁶ R. Price, *Alabi's World*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1990; *The Convict and the Colonel*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1998.
- ⁷ Burke, 'History of Events', pp. 237–40.
- ⁸ J. Clifford and G.E. Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986.
- ⁹ D. Rose, *Hidden Histories: Black Stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River and Wave Hill Stations*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1991.
- ¹⁰ A. Easthope, 'Romancing the Stone: History-Writing and Rhetoric', *Social History*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1993, pp. 235–49.

○ THE POETICS AND PRACTICALITIES OF WRITING

Tom Griffiths

Inga Clendinnen, an outstanding and imaginative historian, recently confessed that when she asked a class of new history graduates which historians they read for pleasure, they laughed! 'I knew why they laughed', she explained sadly. It's because so many scholars compromise communication with pompous posturing; they are too busy staking out intellectual territory and warding others off it; they are too busy digging in their fields isolating 'stone-hard, stone-cold facts' to bother looking up or around; they are so furiously in pursuit of 'objectivity' that they delete themselves from their scripts and employ a weird, passionless prose. Clendinnen says that she enjoys reading great historians, like E.P. Thompson, for the same reason she enjoys reading great novelists—they offer an entrée into richly imagined worlds. But, she confesses, there is a difference. For her, when reading non-fiction, the bliss is tempered and intensified by a critical alertness and an undertow of moral implication not present in what she calls 'the limpid realms of fiction'.¹

So, Clendinnen is throwing out a challenge to us. Look how bad, how inward-looking the writing of scholars can be, she says; yet see what heights we, particularly as writers of non-fiction, can reach.

In a marvellous little book entitled *The Writing Life*, the versatile American author Annie Dillard tells a story about how she learned to chop wood. Once, in order to finish a book, she begged the use of a small cabin which was heated with a wood stove and situated on a remote and sparsely populated island in northern Puget Sound, Washington State. It was a beautiful setting, but all she noticed was the cold. At first she did not know how to split wood. She

set a chunk of alder on the chopping block and harrassed it, at enormous exertion, into tiny wedges that flew all over the sandflat and lost themselves ... After a few whacks my alder chunk still stood serene and unmoved, its base untouched, its tip a thorn.²

One night, Annie Dillard had a dream in which she was given to understand how to split wood. 'You aim, said the dream—of course!—at the chopping block ... You cannot do the job cleanly unless you treat the wood as the transparent means to an end, by aiming