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Into the Archive: History, Writing and Uncertainty

Abstract:

This paper examines the use of ‘archival poetics’ in contemporary history writing, with a specific focus on the use of archival images in Mark McKenna’s *An Eye for Eternity: the Life of Manning Clark* and Kim Scott’s novel *Benang, from the Heart*. It investigates the ways in which the authors of these works move away from the would-be forensic approaches embodied in a certain kind of historiography’s approach to the archive, to create a more personal, powerful and situated kind of history writing. It argues that these works suggest that history is less about the sublime chaos of the past — which cannot be narrated without duplicity, damage or violence — than how we engage the past, which is, on reflection, an entirely different thing.

Biographical Note:

Camilla Nelson lectures in Writing at the University of Notre Dame, Australia, and researches in the fields of creative practice, fiction and non-fiction writing, adaptation and history in popular culture. In addition to a range of scholarly and other essays, she is the author of two novels: *Perverse Acts*, for which she was named as one of the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* Best Young Australian Novelists of the Year, and *Crooked*, which was shortlisted in the 2009 Ned Kelly Awards. Camilla’s work has been recognised through the award of grants from the Literature Board of the Australia Council and the Australian Film Commission. She has twice been invited to be a judge of the NSW Premier’s Literary Awards, as well as the Kathleen Mitchell Award, and has served on the governing board of the NSW Writers’ Centre. She is also a former journalist and has a Walkley Award - Best All Media Online News for her work at the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Her most recent book is a co-edited collection of essays *On Happiness*, forthcoming with UWA Press in 2015.

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Introduction

Historians, by and large, like to deal in certainties rather than uncertainties. To outsiders, their concerns may appear narrowly epistemic — concerned with what we know, or do not know, with what we can or cannot say, even acknowledging at times that ‘saying that we do not know’ may be fundamental to ‘good history’ (McKenna 2005: 109). In more traditional formulations of history the past is understood as something that is finished, over and gone. The present is not deemed to be a continuation of the past, but is separated from the past in a way that is said to be ‘objective’. History is not produced in the present, so much as it is read off a cache of dusty documents in the archives of an official institution, or found buried in a ruined attic or damp basement — that is, places where discoveries can be made, fresh documents can be unearthed — where eyes stare, cold dust stains the fingers, and the remains of the past are forensically enquired into (Farge 2013, Steedman 2002).

Rightly or wrongly, a fondness for gothic terminology has led some cultural critics to suggest that history of this sort constitutes itself through a kind of necrological imagining (Schlunke 2004). Take, for example, Jules Michelet — ‘eater of history’ (Barthes 1992) — who ‘wandered’ the ‘lonely galleries of the Archives for twenty years’ listening to the ‘distant sufferings of so many souls’ – ‘a dismal harmony, a colossal symphony, whose countless dissonances reached my ear’. Michelet’s often-repeated aim was not merely to bear witness to the dead, but to ‘restore their life to them’ – to make the dead live again (1869, reprinted 2013: Location 3275-3527). In a much analysed passage, it is the historian’s breath that gives the dead life, ‘[A]s I breathed their dust, I saw them rise up. They rose from the sepulchre ... ‘ (quoted in Steedman 2002: 27). Michelet could say what the dead ‘really’ meant and ‘really’ thought, argued Benedict Anderson, because the dead not only could not speak but also ‘did not understand’ (Anderson 1991: 198). From then on, ‘the silence of the dead was no longer an obstacle to the exhumation of their deepest desires’ (Anderson 1998: 198).

Michelet’s methods were certainly more complex and indeed politically radical than this often quoted passage from Anderson tends to suggest (Xx0). Indeed, the repudiation of nineteenth century empiricism, which is a feature of so many recent analyses of history, is as much a function of post structuralism’s fundamental suspicion of narrative form – especially the forms of realism (for example, Barthes 1970) – as it

is reaction to the perceived tyranny or authoritarian judgment inherent in the western historical tradition. Nevertheless, Michelet's metaphor of history as the 'Magistrate', who decides upon the fate of the dead, reappears in the works of more contemporary historians, including Inga Clendinnen, who deploys the not too dissimilar image of the historian as the (self-appointed) 'clerk of record' whose function is to bear 'witness'. Clendinnen writes of her own archival research,

'... had I inserted one false detail, one imputation of motive or sensation not justifiable out of the record (including its exclusions, deformations and silences) I would have falsified an actual human and therefore moral relationship ... between myself and the people I had chosen to 're-present' and between myself and my potential readers, who look to me for History (Clendinnen: 1996).

Pursuing history of this sort is indeed 'an odd way of being in the world', as historian Carolyn Steedman somewhat wryly put it. It is a 'way of being in the world' that has given rise to its own particular form of writing – some of it beautiful writing – that 'celebrates the constraints' that it has imposed upon itself. These constraints, according to historians, are constraints that are 'made by the documents themselves'. It is the documents — and the archive more generally — that constrains what may be said and what cannot. As Steedman argues, it is the documents in the archive that are said to grant certain liberties or else 'forbid' the saying of certain things (Steedman 2002: xi).

In recent times, the historians solitary occupation of the archive has been interrupted not only by writers, but also by scholars outside of the discipline of history who have recently taken an 'archival turn', conducting archival research in literal sense, but also in a theoretical sense, spurred on, perhaps, by Derrida's declaration that 'there is no political power without control of the archive, or without memory', made as part of a larger argument that the desire for the archive is inscribed as a desire to locate and possess a point of origin (Derrida 1996: 4). Cultural theory's suspicion of the archive is also anchored in the many works of Foucault in which he argued that the archive is not so much what can be said — or even the limits or the sayable — but is rather the means or system through which things are established (Foucault 1982, 1994). In other

words, the archive has come to be seen as site and symbol of a much wider debate over contested epistemologies, ethics and politics. Cultural theory has expended much effort in drawing attention to the dangers in the historian's epistemic method — that is, the danger that historians may have learnt to ask only those questions that the archive can answer.

This is not a narrowly theoretical problem, but also a political and material one, especially when considering groups and entire peoples who have not (like Europeans) written their histories into documents. Historians too, have begun the task of asking such questions (for example, Burton 2006, Haebich 2014), and in areas such as Aboriginal history have, since the 1970s, begun the task of bringing oral history and other traditions into their analyses (for a summary of shifting methodologies in Aboriginal history, see Attwood 2005, and for a criticism of Attwood's approach from a writer's perspective, see Birch 2004: 137-158).

'The past is not dead,' wrote William Faulkner. 'It isn't even past.' This paper takes Faulkner's famous words as a starting point for a broader reimagining of history as part of a living project. In this sense, it is more attuned to developments in oral history and memory studies, both areas of historical study in which the past is not understood to be something that is severed from the present, so much as it is continually remade in the present through complex subjectivities, so that time's proverbial arrow points not only to the past, but also towards the present in which the story is told and indeed the future that so many narratives imply. It argues that a society's relations to its past may actually be impoverished if they are confined to narrowly epistemic questions. Instead, it argues that a society's 'relations to the past' are enriched and expanded through a variety of entangled relationships that are at once political, moral, aesthetic, material and emotional (and are, furthermore, invariably caught up in language). History is not fiction, but it contains quite a bit of fiction (White 2009, Curthoys and Docker 2005). So too, historical fiction complicates the idea of historical knowledge because it is always a hybrid genre, being neither history nor fiction. In short, this paper refuses the categorical distinction between history and imaginative literature, via which the entanglement of one with the other is rendered as category error and confusion.

It borrows a recently coined term ‘relations to the past’ from the philosopher of history Herman Paul (2014), who has in turn borrowed it from Mark Day (2004a, 2004b). It uses this term to inquire into the historical projects of a range of different writers, with a focus, for the specific purposes of this paper, on Mark McKenna and Kim Scott. In so doing, it also seeks to move beyond unproductive debates that tend to focus discussions of historical fictions on a welter of confrontational details – the soldiers rode on horses or marched on foot, the gunman was standing on the grass or in the library (see, for example, Carnes 2001) — and instead attempts to address the writers’ substantive historical projects. The paper concerns itself primarily with acts of writing, but also acknowledges that the various forms of historical intervention and meaning making that make up a given society’s ‘relations to the past’ are also pursued in music and film, in museums and re-enactment groups, in the work of family and local historians, and even in computer games (acknowledging, at the same time, that these artifacts all work in different registers, with different levels of what might be called ‘seriousness’, with different reach and grip).

The two works discussed below — Mark McKenna’s *An Eye for Eternity: the Life of Manning Clark* and Kim Scott’s *Benang, from the Heart* — are esteemed works of biography and biographical fiction, which foreground a new concern with the archive, and particularly the effort of grappling with an archive that is not innocent or unaware of the historian, archive that isn’t innocent in its unawareness of what it has excluded. They are also works in which the author/historian’s acts of choice are foregrounded through aesthetics means, which makes these choices available for analysis.

Both books seemed to encapsulate a different approach to history – a personal, situated, kind of history writing, an idea a history that works through the present, and not only has designs on the past, but on the future.

Certainly, other writers have used archival poetics in their works. AS Byatt’s *Possession*, famously conjured up a fake archive that described the work of two fictitious Victorian poets. Ondaatje’s English patient, in the novel of the same name, carried around a heavily annotated copy of the histories of Herodotus, into which other material was progressively inserted, in a kind of postcolonial motif. More recently, Peter Carey produced another set of fabulous documentary fakes in his *True History of*

the Kelly Gang, a novel that purports to be a package of documents drawn from an archive from the Melbourne Library – which, of course, doesn't exist.

The two histories that are the focus of this paper seemed to be doing something different to these earlier and better known postmodern fakes. They weren't 'Faking it' in the sense that has interested me in my other work (Nelson 2007). Rather, they were concerned with the way they were writing the past. These books seem to suggest that perhaps history is less about the 'sublime chaos' of the past — which cannot be narrated without duplicity, damage or violence — than how we engage the past, which is, when you reflect on it, an entirely different thing. Hence, there is a sense in which their *way* of narrating is equally, if not more important than *what* is narrated. These writers were attempting to approach the fragility of the past, they were writing histories out of the fragment. Their characteristic gesture was not irony, but sincerity.

The paper attempts to begin to understand the ways in which these texts are representing, and make sense of, their pasts. For example, the way they work to attach certain emotions to the archives they feature, and therefore the histories they tell (nostalgia, melancholy, guilt, anger, presence and loss, for example), or may work to detach emotions, also. The focus is on the political and ethical work that such emotions (as represented in the writing) have the potential to perform. It speaks to the ways in which history has become central to moral and political arguments in the present day. It understands history writing as a form of praxis (Doran 2014: 16), a means of drawing a line from the past to a desired future, and as a mean of shaping community. Or, as Hayden White has argued, history is the stories a society tells itself in order to create a past from which it would like to be descended (White 2009: 147 and passim, Doran 2014).

Mark McKenna's Life of Manning Clark

History is, or ought to be, a struggle with uncertainty. But if historians struggle with their sources, too often little trace of this struggle is to be found on the surface of their elaborately ordered texts. Historians labour for long hours in the archives. They give interviews or write books and essays about their subjective relationships to these struggles (for example, Burton 2005, Steedman 2002, Farge 2013), but few actually dare to frame, let alone foreground, the sheer chanciness and unpredictability of the

struggle in the context of the official narration of their histories. Mark McKenna's biography of Manning Clark is a remarkable piece of writing for precisely this reason. The second chapter entitled 'Manning Clark, MS7550' describes McKenna's encounter with the Clark collection in the National Library of Australia, an archive containing 200 boxes of Clark's personal and professional papers. 'Stretching eight metres in length and climbing some four metres high, they almost touch the ceiling', writes McKenna. Even in its incomplete state, lacking the papers that are held at Manning Clark House, McKenna suggests that the collection is double the size of most of Clark's contemporaries, and ranks among the largest personal archives in Australia. 'My recurring dream', writes McKenna, 'has been one of being buried under an avalanche of cardboard boxes, each with the label "Manning Clark, MS7550"' (McKenna 2011: 29).

It is not only the large quantities of documents that disturb McKenna. Rather, it is the way the archive reveals the older historian at work 'sculpting the documentary monument of his own life'. The archive is 'extraordinary', writes McKenna, because it is 'scattered throughout with notes to the biographer'. McKenna argues that Clark was 'doctoring his papers' heavily since the 1970s, possibly since the publication of the first volume of his six volume history of Australia, when he began to see himself 'as a future subject' (McKenna 2011: 28). Hence, 'When a correspondent's name is unclear, he [Clark] writes the name in capital letters.' He assigns categories, draws signs and arrows pointing the reader back to summaries of who the correspondent is, and the strength or meaning of the correspondent's relationship to him. 'He leaves finding aids,' writes McKenna, '(“for notes of this speech see small blue-covered notebook “The Trip to the Gulf”) and makes sure that the biographer does not miss crucial information (“see also SMH 18/12/76”). (McKenna 2011: 32) 'Far from resisting the biographer,' writes McKenna, 'Clark courts the biographer at every turn' (McKenna 2011: 29). He delights in 'sowing doubt and ambiguity and in layering the lines of his life with mystery'. He poses riddles, paints his virtues in glowing terms then suggests the 'whole edifice of invention is a charade' (McKenna 2011: 34). Nor was Clark's wife Dymphna immune to leaving material traces of her own version of events that constantly encourage the biographer to take a different view of this famously fraught relationship. The result, writes McKenna, 'is a richly layered archive, an individual past constantly being written and fought over' (McKenna 2011: 35).

McKenna's Manning Clark cannot be said to harbour anything remotely akin to what doyens cultural theory would call naive empiricism. Rather, it retains a deep commitment to and acknowledgement of the perspectival nature of experience, and a commitment to acknowledging that there is no escape from what historian Edward Gibbon once called 'the most despicable of pronouns' (that is, the pronoun 'I'). McKenna understood his task was to challenge the elaborate puzzle that the protagonist of his biography had constructed for him. According to McKenna, '[T]he detective work lies in dismantling the archival monument Clark has left behind and finding different tracks' (McKenna 2011: 29-30). It is not unfair to say that like many 'archival detectives' share an essentially romantic sense that the past clings as vestiges to the dust of the documents. But McKenna is clearly conscious of the archives limitations, and the need to look elsewhere in search of history.

McKenna makes this point more powerfully in his essay 'Writing the Past' which is an extended meditation on the writing of his history of Aboriginal dispossession, *Looking for Blackfellas' Point*. He argues that history must remain open not only to silences, to what is and is not intimated in the archive, but also to other forms of knowledge including the experience of the individual writer, as well as to oral histories or 'geologies of fable' gathered from 'out there'. He writes,

It was not history I could document or prove, but the survival and power of these stories was undeniable. Over time, I came to see how many of the stories of Aboriginal death had become rural myths for the whole history of dispossession, a grasping for what had occurred on the frontier. I also realised that the reasons why the stories survived and were constantly retold mattered as much as whether they were true. Instead of dismissing this 'geology of fable' because it could not be substantiated, it enriched the history I was writing. (McKenna 2006: 108)

Kim Scott's Benang

Foucault's 'The Lives of Infamous Men' describes a certain kind of archive that defies enunciation. In this essay, Foucault recounts his encounters with archival records of obscurely lived lives – the mad, bad, or merely unwanted – lives whose only recognition came from their violent encounters with power, the only register of their existence reduced to 'ashes in the few sentences that struck them down' (Foucault 1979: 76-92). The problem, argues Foucault, is that the absence of information about a life effectively derealises it. The essay becomes a meditation on how to represent these lives in a way that preserves their affective force.

The archive, for McKenna, is a source of both truth and deceit. But for Scott the archive is a source of both violence and oppression. In Harley's first encounter with his grandfather's archive, which charts his grandfather's attempt to erase indigenous identity through the dilution of blood and skin colour in order to produce the 'First White Man Born'. It seems for a while that there is no escape from the archives neat genocidal text.

I found myself hovering over sets of documents, things filed in plastic envelopes in rumbling drawers and snapping files. Certificates of birth, death, marriage; newspaper clippings, police reports; letters (personal; from this or that historical society); parish records; cemetery listings; books, photographs...

Photographs. As before, I shuffled idly through them. I was careless, letting them fall to the floor. Various people, all classifiable as *Aboriginal*. There were portraits arranged in pairs; one a snapshot labelled *As I found them*, the other a studio photograph captioned *Identical with above child*. There were families grouped according to skin colour. And, sudden enough to startle me, my own image.

A boy. Wing-nut eared and freckled, he wore a school uniform, a tie, a toothy grin. He grinned like an idiot, like an innocent.

Captions to the photographs; *full-blood, half-caste (first cross), quadroon, octoroon*. There was a page of various

fractions, possible permutations growing more and more convoluted. Of course, in the language of such mathematics it is simple; from the whole to the partial and back again. This much was clear; I was a fraction of what I might have been.

A caption beneath my father's photograph:

Octoroon grandson (mother quarter caste [No.2], father Scottish). Freckles on the face are the only trace of colour apparent.

The problem is that the archive — in this case, the archives of the West Australian Department of Indigenous Affairs — only speaks with the subjectivity of the European. It is by appropriating colonial records into a fictional topography — records that are part fiction, part Scott's own family history — that the author is able to make the archive speak, and make us feel their affective force. Scott's novel makes it clear that the future can only be accessed after the past has been unlocked — the future is, as it were, accessed through a confrontation and coming to terms with the past. Harley is both a witness to, and a narrator of, the history that has produced him. Fiction becomes a means for forging this dialogue between the present and the past, a feat that is achieved through the shaping of a kind of anti-novel that defies the linear conventions of realism, including time, plot, character, and chronology. Instead, the novel centres on the strategies of repressing and recounting, or finding out. It is about representing, and the inability to represent. These narrative modes can at times be bewildering for the reader, as is the way the text refuses access to the historians more 'distant', chronologically linear, more 'rational' picture. The novel presents us with a very different kind of 'relation to the past' that is both seering and affective.

Benang concerns itself with everything that the archive excludes. In this sense, it is a novel that intervenes in the telling of the Australian national story so that the history of Aboriginal people ceases to be written as one of a culture that is 'passing away' (a sense which is often inscribed in histories that figure 'loss', up to and including murder and 'massacre', as a form of the 'shutting down' or 'passing away' of aboriginal culture (see Pinto 2010)), and becomes a history — albeit a painful one — that figures aboriginal history and culture as a continuous opening up.

Conclusion

What is new and interesting in the aesthetics and indeed the ethics of these works is the way that the writers grapple with archives that are not innocent, the way their histories are narrated openly and subjectively, in a way that does not cut off the past, but interweaves the present and the past, in a way which leaves open a space for the reader's interaction with the text.

It is not some shadowy figure hidden within the materiality of the archival documents – a ghost of the past to be resurrected or 're-presented' – so much as it is the document in its specific, material form – as inscribed within a definite set of social, cultural and political relations, and as already covered by an accumulated history of readings that, right now, in the present, exerts a grip on these writers. It is this that forms of the substance of their poetry.

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