



## **Pursuing truth, dodging flak: the adventures of an empirical historian**

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# **Pursuing truth, dodging flak: the adventures of an empirical historian**

*By Dr Cathie Clement, MPHA  
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One of the five aims of the 175th anniversary celebration is 'to encourage balanced debate about the past, the present and the future of Western Australia'.<sup>1</sup> In line with that aim and others, the History Council of Western Australia suggested conference strands ranging from 'The records' to 'The future of history'.<sup>2</sup> The strand that caught my eye was 'Journeys of understanding'. It resonates with an awareness of the personal elements that affect study and work in the discipline of history.

In this paper, I reflect on the personal elements that have affected my career as an historian.<sup>3</sup> My aim is to focus your thoughts on:

- why we view the past as we do;
- why our individual views are so diverse; and,
- how we can encourage balanced debate about the past, the present and the future.

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My 'journey of understanding' started in New South Wales. I was born there, left school at sixteen, found employment in a drawing office, and began to study draughting part-time by correspondence through Sydney Technical College. At eighteen, partly because the services housed, fed and paid people while they studied full-time, I enlisted in the army. That led to recruit training, a six-month draughting course,<sup>4</sup> and work on the maps produced by the Royal Australian Survey Corps in Bendigo. I then married, moved to Perth, and, after an amicable divorce, remained in Western Australia.

A friendship with a mature-age university student led to a return to study because, through him, I discovered that the Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme (TEAS) provided students with living allowances. Those allowances, comparable in value to unemployment benefits, were means-tested but otherwise readily available.<sup>5</sup> So, with nothing more than a "sea change" in mind, I enrolled at Murdoch University. I appreciated the opportunity to explore new horizons but it was only later that I realised that the TEAS was a Whitlam Government initiative and that political decisions have a profound affect on people's access to tertiary education.

My enrolment was in Psychology and, before long, it was obvious that foresight would have been a fine thing. I remembered, too late, that I have no aptitude for mathematics. But the minuses were offset by pluses, which included new friends and, through exposure to staff members such as Jim Macbeth and Professor John Raser, new ways of thinking.

In second year, wanting to savour what I was doing, I changed programs and dropped back to three-quarters of a full-time workload. The TEAS allowance was available for only three years of undergraduate study but the fourth year

was not a problem because, like most students, I had ways of generating income. One way was to trade numerous parcels of cheap shares on the stock market. More than two decades later, I still recall psyching myself into asking brokers to place minuscule orders for shares that might double in value by rising by a cent or two. There was also a frantic listing of all the transactions after the tax office demanded full particulars of the trading!

Back at Murdoch, the program switch took me to a Social and Political Theory (SAPT) degree. It was a fairly pragmatic switch. I had no interest in either politics or theory but, as far as qualifications were concerned, a SAPT degree sounded better than a General Studies degree. Both programs gave credit for interesting units in Aboriginal Studies, Social History, and Women's Studies, and, while the core units in SAPT sounded heavy, they also sounded manageable. Again, foresight would have been a fine thing.

My capacity to absorb the writings of Marx and his fellow travellers proved equal to my flair for mathematics. That drawback became glaringly obvious when a major essay question asked whether an Australian working class existed in the nineteenth century as 'a class for itself'. Interpreting it literally, I did some research and attended the mandatory interview to discuss my planned approach. My statement that I would be answering 'No' to the question drew a stunned look. I had concluded that the abundance of strike-breaking workers showed that the working class was not 'a class for itself'. I was supposed to have discovered that the existence of a Labor party showed that the working class was 'a class for itself'.

The realisation that a student was expected to argue a predetermined thesis in an Arts degree essay presented a problem. The need for more research was obvious but I had to decide whether to submit the required answer or, on principle, argue my case and settle for a poor grade. Practicality won but filing the resulting 'A' between 'H' for hypocrisy and 'I' for indignation did little to offset the associated disillusionment. It became easier to select and tailor evidence to suit ideological essay questions but, after missing another predetermined thesis, I conceded that ideology, like mathematics, should be left to others.

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Before continuing with the hapless student's adventures, I want to stress that, in making the preceding comments, I am not attacking Murdoch University. I will always be grateful to Murdoch for giving me the opportunity to become an historian. I accept that politics and ideology are part of life but I find it sad that partisan thinking often blinds people to the good that can exist in alternatives.

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In my final year as an undergraduate, primary source research introduced me to a new world. The resulting social history essays provided the last of the credit points necessary for a second major (History) and, as part of my 'journey of understanding', revealed the future. A career that involved the study of archives, manuscripts and other records sounded just right.

Modest allowances and scholarships were available for higher study so, having lost none of my pragmatism, I took that path. The goal was to become an empirical historian specialising in the history of the Kimberley—the far north of Western Australia.<sup>6</sup> It was a tad idealistic but, believing that the region would become either a tourist Mecca or an Aboriginal State by the turn of the century, I thought that being a Kimberley historian might one day pay the bills.

Professor Geoffrey Bolton provided supervision and inspiration in an Honours year in 1981 but my plan to document the European colonisation of the Kimberley proved too broad a topic for a dissertation. So, after mapping the region's early pastoral leases, I analysed the rhetoric and chicanery associated with their allocation.<sup>7</sup> That work, by revealing century-old political and bureaucratic shenanigans, indicated that pursuing the truth about other aspects of Kimberley colonisation would be an interesting exercise.

My original topic looked suitable for a Ph.D so I returned to the task of transcribing archives and manuscripts. To most people, that task would be incredibly boring. To me, it was fascinating to bring together previously unrelated data about people, places, shipping and incidents. I then discovered that Peter Bridge, the owner of Hesperian Press, planned to publish some of the sources that I had so carefully transcribed and indexed. A Ph.D written after its sources became readily available was hardly going to break new ground so, if my research was to retain value, a change of tack was required. That change resulted in collaboration in which Peter and I edited and annotated material for publication.<sup>8</sup>

Whilst contemplating a new thesis topic, I undertook small research jobs and turned my transcriptions into the nucleus of the Kimberley Historical Sources Project.<sup>9</sup> I also became involved in the East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project. That work produced, firstly, a paper on pre-settlement contact, and, secondly, some European context for the massacre stories contributed by the Aboriginal participants.<sup>10</sup> From my point of view, those tasks were everything that research projects should be. Instead of collecting information only to see where it would lead, I was searching for data that would show whether a correlation existed between oral testimony and documentary evidence. The months of archival research revealed a high degree of correlation. Particularly poignant was the discovery of an archival file that provided a date and corroboration for testimony about a massacre at Mistake Creek.<sup>11</sup>

With that work behind me, I settled down and wrote a thesis that related land acquisition schemes to the evolution of pastoral leasing legislation in Western Australia.<sup>12</sup> My plan to use higher education to create resources for the further study of the Kimberley had not worked out quite as I envisaged but it did provide a solid foundation for a career revolving around research. And that is what I have done since, combining research for the Kimberley Historical Sources Project with other commissioned or funded work.<sup>13</sup>

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One of my most satisfying commissions involved native title research into the presence of people in the Keep River locality in the Northern Territory. Its outcome was a 98-page synopsis and a 381-page appendix of documentary evidence arranged in an annotated chronology.<sup>14</sup> The chronology showed, among other things, that Mary Durack's writing from the 1930s provided the key link in a chain of evidence connecting one of the claimants with her country. To me, being able to reveal that link was the epitome of working as an historian. I was being paid by the Crown, which was contesting the native title claim, but I still had the freedom to pursue and report any evidence relevant to Aboriginal people having a connection with the area under claim.

Given my enthusiasm for my Keep River work, I was stunned when another historian later alleged that a non-argumentative native title report 'is not impartial compared to other historical interpretations of the same material'. She was referring to work commissioned by the Crown Solicitor's Office on behalf of the Western Australian Government. Labelling it as 'transcribed-archive-as-history', she depicted it as 'a useful tool for those groups opposing native title claims'. Unaware that the approach had been used elsewhere, she also argued that it had been invented for native title and that 'the standards of neutrality which some native title practitioners seek to impose are invented for the purpose of litigation'.<sup>15</sup>

This issue hinges on the extent to which expert witness reports written for native title cases should incorporate argument about the silences and gaps that occur in documentary evidence. The key word here is 'argument'. We are not talking about the routine practice of noting, and perhaps explaining, the silences and gaps that occur in documentary evidence. Our critic wants to go one step further. She wants argument from 'contemporary critical theory' included in all native title reports. She maintains that 'it is dangerous to try and avoid historiographical debate in the context of the native title process, or to claim it is an impediment to writing history for the Court'.<sup>16</sup> What she fails to concede, or perhaps realise, is that such debate and argument would be out of place in many native title reports.

A convenient example of such a report is one that I prepared for a native title case in which our critic appeared as an expert witness for the claimants. I was required to report on past and current improvements and enclosures on 63 parcels of land within the claim area. As one would expect, my report focused on the erection and subsequent fate of fences, bores, windmills, houses and other structures.<sup>17</sup> I was at liberty to decide how to write the report but, unlike our critic, I felt no compulsion to include argument about 'buried or encoded references to murderous frontier violence'.<sup>18</sup> My thinking on that point was not influenced by a desire to avoid such argument or to keep it out of the court. It was merely an acknowledgment that such argument would have been superfluous in a report about improvements and enclosures.

This difference of opinion over native title reports is a small but not insignificant part of the so-called History Wars. Elsewhere, complainants argue that historians and others have exaggerated the violence that occurred in the British colonisation of Australia. In 2001, I bought into one such skirmish after Keith Windschuttle borrowed my Mistake Creek massacre findings for an attack he was making on the outgoing Governor General. The ensuing welter of words resolved little but the intervention did provide an additional point of view for people who wish to know about events at Mistake Creek.<sup>19</sup>

Participation in the History Wars is not a particularly gratifying or noble activity. Partisan thinking and point-scoring are not only prevalent but also likely to produce dialogue that would not be out of place in the world that Lewis Carroll created on the other side of the looking glass.<sup>20</sup> Awareness of that parallel prompted me to consider the role of 'the Humpty Dumpty factor' in the History Wars. That factor can be seen to come into play whenever people make words mean what they want them to mean.<sup>21</sup>

Another negative aspect of the History Wars is the absence of discussion amongst the protagonists as to why their views of history are so disparate. Conferences, debates and interviews generally revolve around the presentation and defence of individual opinions. There is no effort to find common ground or to converge towards less antagonistic positions.<sup>22</sup>

I believe that, if we are to have balanced debate about the past, the nature of the History Wars—and perhaps even the teaching of history—must change. Instead of engaging in partisan arguments and searching only for evidence that supports an entrenched position, historians with strongly opposing views need to start hearing one another. In particular, they need to be mindful that a rigid approach to interpreting the past, regardless of whether that approach is empirical, postmodern, poststructural or something altogether different, can compromise objectivity.

Without such a change, the schism that affects the discipline of history will become more entrenched, thereby reducing the scope that exists for reaching a shared understanding of our history. Community confidence in historians as professionals will also continue to decline if the History Wars protagonists persist in using allegation, innuendo and misinformation in their campaigns.

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My view of the History Wars and the practice of history is a product of my 'journey of understanding'. Your 'journey of understanding' will have given you a different but perhaps not dissimilar view. None of us is infallible in pursuing the truth but, if historians with disparate views could bring themselves to discuss their differences, we might see a decrease in the flak that makes the History Wars so unproductive. A positive outcome in that area would encourage balanced debate about the past, the present and the future.

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- <sup>1</sup> Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Western Australia, 'About the 175th Anniversary', copy viewed at <<http://www.175anniversary.wa.gov.au>>.
- <sup>2</sup> History Council of Western Australia, Call for papers, undated. The title of this paper reflects its preparation for a session that was tentatively identified as 'History wars in the west'.
- <sup>3</sup> At the conference, this paper included a Powerpoint presentation to which Jaime Nelson, a graphic designer and illustrator, contributed her flair and expertise. These footnotes convey some of the information that was included in the Powerpoint presentation.
- <sup>4</sup> The course, undertaken at the School of Military Survey, Bonegilla (Victoria), culminated in the award of a Topographic Draughting Certificate.
- <sup>5</sup> For information about living allowances available in the years 1974–2003, see <[http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac\\_ctte/completed\\_inquiries/2002-04/poverty/submissions/sub103.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/completed_inquiries/2002-04/poverty/submissions/sub103.pdf)>, University of South Australia Students Association, *Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry into Poverty and Financial Hardship in Australia: Submission from the University of South Australia Students Association*, March 2003, p. 9.
- <sup>6</sup> Prior to 1981, G C Bolton, Mary Durack and Andrew Gill had produced the main record-based works on Kimberley history. Parallel work based on oral history included the collaboration between Paddy Roe, Butcher Joe Nangan and Stephen Muecke (Broome area) and between Grant Ngabidj, Jack Sullivan and Bruce Shaw (East Kimberley). Little work had been done on early contact.
- <sup>7</sup> Pastoral Leasing in the Kimberley District of Western Australia, Honours dissertation, Murdoch University, 1982.
- <sup>8</sup> The edited works include G H Lamond, *Tales of the Overland: Queensland to Kimberley in 1885*, Hesperian Press, Carlisle, 1986, and Cathie Clement & Peter Bridge, (eds), *Kimberley Scenes: Sagas of Australia's Last Frontier*, Hesperian Press, Carlisle, 1991.
- <sup>9</sup> For details, see 'Documenting Colonisation – The Kimberley Historical Sources Project' in *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1987, pp. 127–38; and 'Technology, technique and tenacity: tools for tackling local history' in *Post Haste the Millennium: Opportunities and Challenges in Local Studies*, edited by Margaret Pember, Local Studies Section, Australian Library and Information Association Ltd, East Victoria Park (WA), 2000, pp. 257–68.
- <sup>10</sup> *Pre-settlement intrusion into the East Kimberley*, East Kimberley Working Paper No. 24, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1988; and *Historical notes relevant to impact stories of the East Kimberley*, East Kimberley Working Paper No. 29, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1989.
- <sup>11</sup> State Records Office of Western Australia, AN 5/2, Police Department, Acc 430, 1854/1915, Aboriginal Native Tracker 'Nipper'.
- <sup>12</sup> Australia's North-west: A Study of Exploration, Land Policy and Land Acquisition, 1644-1884, Ph.D thesis, Murdoch University, 1992.
- <sup>13</sup> For examples of that work, see *Kimberley District Pastoral Leasing Directory, 1881-1900*, National Heritage (for the Kimberley Historical Sources Project), Mount Lawley (WA), 1993; *A Guide to Printed Sources for the History of the Kimberley Region of Western Australia*, Centre for Western Australian History, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, 1996; and *Old Halls Creek: A town remembered*, National Heritage (for the Kimberley Historical Sources Project), Mount Lawley (WA), 2000.
- <sup>14</sup> Historical Synopsis of European and Aboriginal Use and Occupation of Land in the Keep River National Park, An expert witness report prepared for The Solicitor for the Northern Territory for submission to the Federal Court in the matter of *Ben Ward & Ors - v - The State of Western Australia & Ors*, WAG 6001 of 1995 (Keep River National Park Native Title Claim), October 1996.
- <sup>15</sup> Fiona Skyring, 'History Wars: Debates about History in the native title process', *Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 23, pp. 75–7. For an example of the prior use of a synopsis with an historical chronology attached, see Cathie Clement,

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Swan Brewery Precinct: A Summary of Existing Reports on its Cultural Heritage Significance to the Aboriginal Community, a report prepared for the Heritage Council of Western Australia, 1992.

<sup>16</sup> Skyring, 'History Wars', pp. 74–5 and 81–2.

<sup>17</sup> In the Federal Court of Australia, Western Australia, District Registry, General Division, No. WAG 6100 of 1998 between: John Dudu Nangkiriny & Others on behalf of the Karajarri People, Applications, and The State of Western Australia & Others, Respondents: History of Pastoral Lease Holdings and Pastoral Improvements and Enclosures in the Claim Area, An expert witness report prepared for the State of Western Australia, filed and dated 16 August 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Skyring, 'History Wars', p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> For an overview of the arguments, see 'Mistake Creek' in *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, edited by Robert Manne, Black Inc. Agenda, Melbourne, 2003, pp. 199–214.

<sup>20</sup> For comment on the nature of the History Wars, see Stuart Macintyre, 'Past shrouded in polemics', *Australian*, 5 July 2004, Opinion (copy available at <<http://www.eniar.org/news/Macintyre.html>>). See also Gregory Melleuish, 'History locked in the past', *Australian*, 6 July 2004, Opinion (copy available at <<http://hnn.us/roundup/entries/6032.html>> under the heading 'Macintyre's 'History Wars' Are Self-Indulgent'). For Lewis Carroll's work, see *Alice through the looking glass*, 1872, reprinted by Dragon's World with illustrations by Malcolm Ashman, London, 1989.

<sup>21</sup> For further discussion, see Cathie Clement, 'The Humpty Dumpty factor in Aboriginal history', *Teaching History*, Vol. 37, No. 4, December 2003, pp. 26–32.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/booktalk/stories/s944021.htm>> and <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/booktalk/stories/s944065.htm>> for transcripts of 'Whitewash versus The Fabrication of Aboriginal History...', *Book Talk*, 13 and 20 September 2003.