

## Powerful narratives and compelling explanations: educational historians and museums at work

### *Introduction*

This special issue of the *History of Education Review* is built around the themes of a joint conference of the Australian and New Zealand History of Education Society and the Australian National Museum of Education held in September 2017 at the University of Canberra. Along with the central theme of “powerful narratives and compelling explanations” were four sub-themes: education and its role in nation building, narrative, explanation and interpretation, museums and popular history and biography and history. The selected papers for this special issue all address the central theme, and one or more of the sub-themes.

Writers of history produce narratives and explanations of the past. Historian William Cronon has on several occasions written about the narrative form and the narrative power of history, urging historians to continue to tell “stories that matter”, and stories about why the past matters, to the general public and to students as much as to other historians. Such narratives should aim to place the past in dialogue with the present, keep the past alive for the wider public and ask what the past means and why people should care about it (Cronon, 1992, 2013). Surely this is the aim of both educational historians and museums. Narratives and explanations can be both powerful and compelling. Convincingly argued and supported by evidence they may bring greater understanding of the past and its relationship with the present. But power can also be manipulative and coercive. The power of the historical narrative, whether written text or material display, bestows a responsibility upon historians and museums to be aware of bias or particular points of view in its making.

Like historians, museum directors, curators and designers of exhibitions produce narratives and explanations of the past. What their collection policies concentrate on, how they organise and display their collections and how they decide on the subjects and purposes of their exhibitions, influence their presentations of history. Their presentations are for wide audiences and thus museums are not simply sites at which a particular representation occurs, but agencies which have the power to define knowledge and “tell culturally authoritative stories” (Macdonald, 1998, p. 19). How aware are museums that they produce particular versions of the past? This may vary according to the policies and leadership of the different institutions. Collecting policies can be active or passive. Well-funded institutions with professional staff trained for museum and archival work are likely to produce the clearest guidelines and policies. Other museums with limited staff and budgets may be over-dependent on donations. Perhaps, they produce nostalgia and myth as much as informed explanations of the connection between their historical artefacts and the development of reliable knowledge about the past.

There are two papers in this number that address some of the issues as they relate to museums, including a very special kind of museum, the heritage site. The paper co-authored by Kay Morris Matthews and Eloise Wallace describes a collaboration between a regional museum and an historian based at a nearby university. Their aim was to produce an engaging contribution to the local and social history of the First World War in New Zealand. A general absence of women as a subject of the New Zealand commemorations of the centenary of the Great War was one impetus. From the account presented by Matthews and Wallace, the exhibition achieved its goals, including the creation of a remarkable resource for engaging community in general and school children in particular. The authors’



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discussion of the logistics, indeed economics and politics involved in the collaboration between the historian and the museum, considers the conditions necessary for a successful outcome. At the same time, the outcome may have required a restricted range of possible interpretations of the persons and phenomena discussed. The responsibility of the museum to its community, and indeed the exercising of a function as community-builder, may have diminished more critical approaches to possible race, class and gender, indeed colonial/imperial narratives and explanations. In that sense, the paper also considers the circumstances of “popular history” in relation to other kinds of history produced by historians and museums.

The second paper on this sub-theme takes a more critical approach. Amy McKernan’s article on “affective practices and the prison visit” has something important to say about the relationships between visitors’ experiences of heritage sites and the learning about history that may occur, intended or otherwise. One site under discussion is Port Arthur in Tasmania, a site about which there are plenty of popular pre-conceptions, most associated with trauma or violence, either from its convict past or through being the site of a mass murder in 1996. The other is the Cascades Female Factory, also in Tasmania. McKernan asks what the administrators of the sites want visitors, students of history as well as casual tourists, to learn as a result of their visits. The examination is wide-ranging and theoretically informed. McKernan makes a special case for the significance of feelings or emotions in relation to the sites. These are sometimes ignored by the official narratives and explanations. The author suggests that such feelings cannot be ignored, and that they might be engaged with productively. It is an argument that recognises not only straight-forward narratives and explanations as important to the experience of the museum and heritage site, but the centrality of feelings and emotions both spontaneously or otherwise felt or engineered by such sites.

One of the themes of this issue is the role of education in nation building. Although compulsory schooling was rather essential for the building of modern nation states and citizens worthy enough to inhabit them, such schooling could also exclude and damage minority groups. Beth Marsden’s paper is a notable contribution to literature addressing the experience and representations of Aboriginal peoples in schools and school curricula, demonstrating some of the familiar insights of revisionist educational history. Annemarie Augschöll Blasbicher’s paper perhaps unexpectedly shares this theme and interpretation of history. There was the intention of the Italian fascist state from the 1920s to reshape its German-speaking minority in the north into an assimilated “Italian” citizenry. Schools were to be one of the significant agents. Local teachers were replaced by “Italian” teachers, the language-of-instruction and new curricula ignored, indeed denigrated, the local. The consequences were damaging. One of several effects was a dramatic decline in literacy. The author effectively argues the transgenerational effects of fascist educational policies reaching to the present day.

A first for the *History of Education Review* is the publication of an interview with a live actor in the making of national education policy. Lyndsay Connors began her educational activism in the 1970s, going on to be a national Schools Commissioner in the 1980s. Her activism on behalf of public education, and the direction of significant educational resources to those who need them most continues to the present day. The interview published in this special issue not only includes a narrative about the forming of national education policy in Australia over the last half century but explanations for the power of the non-government school sector, and the Catholic Church in particular, over the public funding of Australian schools.

The remaining papers engage with the issue of biography, and its relationship to the theme of the issue: “Powerful narratives and compelling explanations”. One of these looks at a particular kind of biography, hagiography, the life of a saint. Carole Hooper interrogates one episode in the life of Australia’s first Catholic Saint, Mary McKillop. In the process she provides substantial evidence that, at least in one respect, the standard biographies of McKillop are

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misleading, even wrong. In doing so, Hooper reminds us of some of the fundamental work of the historian, to revise older narratives and explanations. This involves not just the search for stronger evidence, but the subjecting of apparently settled conclusions to critical question. The search for truer narratives and better explanations in history is on-going.

Josephine May tells a story about another nineteenth century teacher in Australia. At the moment when public high schools were being invented, along with the formulation of an appropriate high school curriculum, and ideas about who might attend such institutions, Anna Marie Hlawaczek applied for a teaching position in a public high school in New South Wales. Her career was not a success. There is a substantial historiography about the new secondary schools for girls and their teachers in Australia, but this paper not only highlights older explanations about why women teachers with the strength of their convictions may have run into trouble, but focuses on the reception that women not of the dominant Anglo-Australian cultural group may have experienced as they came up against the male-dominated bureaucracies of Australian colonial education systems.

Christine Trimmingham Jack's paper is a historically informed "autobiography", the kind of biography where subject and author merge. In writing the "self" as history we are once more confronted with the issue of memory as a reliable provider of historical narratives and explanation. Trimmingham Jack is among the few educational historians who have thought through such issues systematically, always with reference to the insights that contemporary theory has to offer. Her paper may be read in tandem with that of Amy McKernan. Emotions, feelings – including memories of emotions and feelings – can provide explanatory evidence about historical phenomena. Both papers are important for the themes of this special issue because they expand the sense of what constitutes significant approaches in the construction of historical narratives and explanations.

The final paper by John McIntyre contributes to the biographical theme by considering an often-neglected connection between the histories of children and the performing arts. Rosemary Benjamin was the founder of the Sydney Theatre for Children which operated from the 1930s to the 1950s. McIntyre explains the form that this theatre took in terms of progressivism in education, part of that great impulse from the late nineteenth century that insisted that children learnt best by playing, doing and creating. By the middle of the twentieth century there was also the Freudian influence on thinking about children's development. This paper skilfully puts together both narrative and explanation for an important moment in the history of modernity as it appeared in educational thinking and activity.

We conclude this Introduction to this special issue with further general discussion of "powerful narratives and compelling explanations" in the work of historians and museums. Both have in recent times often endured hostile scrutiny for the explanations and narratives they produce.

Some museums of course abjure strong narratives. They may have been influenced by postmodernist criticisms of strong narratives and compelling explanations. Most phenomena, let alone historical phenomena, resist capture by a single narrative and explanation, however, well evidenced. Avoidance of such does not always save museums from hostile comment. The Australian Museum in Canberra several years ago was criticised for not providing a compelling narrative, but only of one kind. A number of the Museum's critics hoped to restore the former near hegemonic status of one compelling explanation/narrative, that of the emergence of a successful Australian nation[1]. This was but one skirmish in the "history wars" that are not finished even now[2]. There remain many who believe that the role of major public museums, and the teaching of history in the school curriculum and elsewhere, is to valorise the successful nation, with its pioneers and settlers, nation-builders and developers of the economy. Critics of this powerful narrative in Australia often ask how they and their associated explanations treat Indigenous peoples, women, children, the Irish, the poor, immigrants, non-Christians – and the list could go on.

Earlier this year one of the editors of this special issue visited the once magnificent Schwules Museum in Berlin. It was among the best local museums in the world tracing the history of gay men and lesbians not only for its own city, Berlin, but elsewhere in the world. In recent times its core exhibit has been retracted. The museum no longer finds it possible to produce a powerful narrative and compelling explanation of homosexual history, from persecution, resistance to medical and civil persecution, through the brief cultural flowering in the Weimar Republic to the depredations, to put it mildly, of the Nazi period, and into recent times, as civil rights have been fought for, and communities have flourished once more.

The problem has been the splintering or “fragmenting of the subject” of the older compelling narrative. Apparently, any acceptable narrative must now take account of associated groups and communities that were formerly side lined – in particular the permutations of the “queer”, LGBTIQ population. It is an example of the difficulty that museums and historians have of providing powerful narratives and compelling explanations when the object of study fragments, often for good reason, as minorities, or those previously not accorded recognition, demand their place in the story.

There are other reasons beyond those that we have identified as hindering powerful narratives and compelling explanations. We have concentrated on three. First, the retreat from and suspicion of certainty in a post-modern age. Second is the splintering of the subject, as various hegemonies are broken down under the pressure of recognising outsider groups, the insistence on narratives and explanations that recognise social diversity, historically or otherwise. And third, the political pressure that comes when the “correct” narrative or explanation fails to be provided. Museums and historians are often subject to criticism by those who are powerful in their advocacy of only a select few in a range of possible truths.

Many of these pressures are not new. Is there a possible resolution to the problems we have identified? Should powerful narratives and compelling explanations even be our goal? And if they are, what might be the cost? Is the search for such narratives and explanations in history naive? One alternative is timorous or unambitious history. This we are not so happy with. Instead we argue that the subject of any narrative is, in fact, always open to fragmentation and revision. Moreover, the researcher/interpreter should know that there are almost always unknowns and weaknesses in the available evidence and chosen methodology.

Perhaps, we should recognise that historical work is mainly about striving towards more satisfactory explanations, that the evidence, the research methodologies and interpretations will always be open to debate and question. Perhaps, as recognised by William Cronon (2013), “seemingly contradictory historical narratives can yield truths that are all the more profound when juxtaposed against each other” (p. 19). And narratives need not become less powerful, or less compelling because they tell a multi-faceted story. Compelling explanations and powerful narratives should continue to be sought, but maybe they will not convince any – or everyone for very long, and maybe that is both inevitable and good.

**Craig Campbell**

*University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia, and*

**Dorothy Kass**

*Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia*

## Notes

1. For an informed discussion of this controversy, see Greg McCarthy (2004).
2. Recent scholarly discussions of the history wars and their relevance for museums, the writing of history, and the presentation of history to school children and the general public include: Nettleback (2011), Attwood (2011), Taylor (2013), Stanley (2014). For continuing contributions to these issues, see the website “Honest history”, available at [www.honesthistory.net.au](http://www.honesthistory.net.au) (accessed 26 January 2018).

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