REVIEW ESSAY: The writing of Indigenous history is both personal and political. Discuss.

_The culture of the conquered can be injured and extinguished simply because it can be explained by the conqueror._

Fourmile (1996: 17)
Writing that is strictly personal rather than political remains unpublished, private and therefore unknown to historians. Whether or not the author intends it, if a text is published, it will take on some amount of political significance. A published work of history can be analysed for its perspective, purpose, intended audience, content and textual form and all of these elements shape the political message of the text. Similarly, to describe historical writing as strictly political with no presence of the personal is inaccurate. The elements listed above that shape the political message of the text result from the personal differences between the individuals who are writing. Indigenous history cannot be strictly political because it is about people and it is written by people and it cannot be strictly personal if it is interpreted by society. It has perspective, purpose, an intended audience, content that is included and excluded and a particular textual form. These things combine to make any writing both political and personal.

Any writer of Indigenous history writes from a perspective. This perspective is shaped by the writer’s own personal background and viewpoint, and presents a particular political argument to the reader. In Victoria in 1835, John Batman and the Port Phillip Association drew up a ‘treaty’ with the Kulin nation for ownership of their land.\(^1\) This story can be told and read politically to portray relations between early settlers and Indigenous peoples. It has generally been accepted by historians throughout Australia’s history that John Batman tricked the Kulin people into signing away their land for his own benefit.\(^2\) Told from this perspective, it exaggerates the power and malice of Batman against the innocent and clueless locals. However, Bain Attwood and Helen Doyle choose to present a more favourable view of the Port Phillip Association. They give evidence that some members of the party were sympathetic to the Kulin nation, and that they believed there should have been more compensation provided in exchange for the land.\(^3\) Attwood and Doyle also argue that from the perspective of the Indigenous people, there may have been some sense of agreement and allegiance, exploring the idea of an oral or ceremonial agreement.\(^4\) Historian Robert Kenny emphasises the perspective of the Kulin people as free and aware agents. Kenny argues that to dismiss the treaty as trickery is “a corresponding dismissal of Kulin agency and knowledge”.\(^5\) The personal perspective of these authors represented in the text takes on the form of a political argument.

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\(^4\) Ibid., pp. 54-5.
\(^5\) Kenny, op. cit., p. 38.9.
As well as their perspective, a historian’s personal purpose of their writing shapes the politics of their work. Keith Windschuttle claimed to be setting the facts straight with no political agenda of his own when he wrote his controversial work ‘The Fabrication of Indigenous history’.6 His work challenged the experience and research of many other historians, and his intention was to defend “the integrity of both the nation itself and the civilisation from which it derives.”7 Its purpose is to ‘correct’ history, and as James Boyce argues, even once the factual errors in Windschuttle’s work are recognised, its political and cultural impact will remain.8 Jackie Huggins, Aboriginal historian, also sees Indigenous history as an important way to correct Australian perceptions of their past. For her, the study and teaching of Indigenous history is a way to address the ignorance, prejudice and lies that were a part of her generation’s schooling.9 Both of these writers of Indigenous history are personally motivated to shape social and political discourse.

The use of writing in Indigenous history can itself be considered political. In order to make demands in a culture that did not value oral histories or traditional Aboriginal cultural practices, Indigenous peoples used writing as a tool for making their voices heard amongst the cultural majority. These texts perform the role of Indigenous history because they record personal reactions to the events of the time. They also document Aboriginal activism. For example, in the 1870 and 80s, the Government sought to close Coranderrk Station in Victoria, denying any rights of the families who had lived there for 25 years.10 Led by William Barak, the Aboriginal residents fought fiercely for the right to manage themselves, and for rights to the land. They wrote letters to the newspaper and submitted a petition.11 In these submissions, the residents outline their own experiences and argue for their entitlements. As Atwood and Doyle note, “the discourse of history has been characterised by an approach that has privileged writing as its source of information and insights about the past.”12 By using the vehicle of writing, William Barak and his allies crossed cultural boundaries, using dominant political channels to pursue their personal interests.

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8 Manne, op. cit., p. 17.
12 Attwood & Doyle, op. cit., p.10.
The social context of an author and their audience affects the way history is recorded. Indigenous Histories vary greatly in their facts and their sentiment depending on their audience, their time frame, and the different attitudes of the time towards Aboriginal people. Descriptions of Rottnest Island Prison have been recorded in different historical contexts. From 1838 to 1931, over 3 500 Aboriginal men served at Rottnest Island Prison, off the coast of Western Australia. An enquiry into the prison in 1883 found that the treatment of the Aboriginal inmates was “kind and humane”, but bemoans the failed attempts to ‘civilise’ them.\(^{13}\) Over a century later, Richard Edney also writes about Rottnest Island Prison. He frames his description in terms of the now inexcusable mistreatment of and discrimination against the Indigenous people:

> ...Rottnest Island prison had features of the core themes in the history of the treatment of indigenous communities in Australia: excessive bureaucratic control; a high degree of paternalism; indifference to the concern of indigenous communities and a failure to accord indigenous communities any participation and control over matters that directly affected them.\(^{14}\)

Looking anachronistically, we can see the above themes in the 1883 commission’s report. In both of the histories, the political ideologies expressed are a reflection of the different societies they inhabit.

The stories that writers choose to include or exclude are an important factor when considering the political and personal nature of histories. Writers of Indigenous history choose whose voices and experiences to recognise. This is particularly evident in reports of frontier violence. Many incidents of violence between new arrivals and native inhabitants went unreported, and those that were not always investigated. This makes it difficult for modern historians to reconstruct what actually happened.\(^{15}\) The statistics were also manipulated by police officers and settlers at the time.\(^{16}\) Historians such as Keith Windschuttle have used these gaps in the records to argue that the politics of the time have been misunderstood by modern commentators to be worse than they actually were. Others have conducted rigorous research to prove that the death tolls were astronomical, with Robert Hughes equating the killing of Tasmanian Aboriginals with genocide.\(^{17}\) Some

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\(^{17}\) N. Clements, *Black War : Fear, Sex and Resistance in Tasmania*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Qld, 2014, p.4.
historians may also feel that they are not entitled to speak on behalf of Aboriginal people. Jackie Huggins, Indigenous Historian rebukes this line of thinking. “I think to say that writing about Aboriginal people is too hard is a great cop-out.”\textsuperscript{18} The personal choices of the historian to include or exclude certain facts and stories has perhaps the largest effect on the political tone of Indigenous history.

The writing of Indigenous history is marked by personal elements and also subject to political interpretations. These interpretations may or may not be deliberately shaped by the writer, but are nonetheless formed once a work is published. A historian’s own personal background and viewpoint shape their perspective on an event. The purpose of the work reflects an author’s personal motives for writing history and the textual form is a way to present an argument to a society that values written sources. These perspectives and motives reflect the social context and the author’s intended audience. Most importantly, the voices and experiences that are included or excluded reveal the position of the author on the issue. In the writing of Indigenous history, the published work, even the personal, cannot easily be separated from the political.

\textsuperscript{18} Huggins, op. cit., p.125.
Assessment 3: Review Essay

Bibliography


