



The End of History in Australian Universities

Publish Date:

August 2015

We are constantly looking for our origins, in the hope they will hint at our future. It should be a concern that few Australian universities offer British history to undergraduates, writes Chris Berg

Every country has national myths and legends—vague memories of the past that add up to a sense of national identity. For Australia think Gallipoli, the union strikes of the 1890s, the austerity of the Great Depression, and so on.

This populist historical awareness has practical consequences. How Australians understand, for instance, the causes and significance of the Great Depression has shaped how they understand the modern economy. There is a good case that Kevin Rudd and Wayne Swan were driven in 2008 by a fear of becoming James Scullin, the Depression era Labor prime minister whose economic failings made his a one term government.

Likewise, the place of Gallipoli in the national mindset is an ongoing contest that implicitly relates to our modern debates about foreign policy, our alliances, and military commitments.



History matters, not just for its own sake but for the way it reflects back to the present. We are constantly looking for our origins, in the hope they will somewhat hint at our future.

In July 2015, the IPA released a major report, *The End of History ... in Australian Universities*. The goal was to understand how history is understood by looking at what academic historians pass on to the next generation. Few undergraduate history students go on to be academic historians, of course. But many become secondary school history teachers, and the rest constitute a cohort of formally trained historians, regardless of whether they practice the profession of history writing and research after graduation.

Underpinning this report was our creation of the first complete database of history subjects taught at the undergraduate level in Australian colleges and universities in 2014—all 739 subjects, taught at 34 separate institutions. We categorised the subjects according to their geographic focus, the historical period they looked at, and their 'theme'.

Indeed, this is something that the historical profession itself should be, and has been, interested in. Our research was based substantially on the work of a report last published in 2004 by the Australian Historical Association (AHA). The categories were largely theirs, and the notion of a traditional canon was likewise derived from the AHA. Thus we could make some useful comparisons not just about the state of undergraduate history today, but how it has changed.

Our most dramatic finding was that out of 739 undergraduate history subjects, there were just fifteen that specifically focused on British history. Those fifteen subjects were spread between just ten different institutions. In other words, there are 24 history faculties in Australia that do not offer any British history to undergraduates.

This is quite striking. It is not an exaggeration to say that the institutions that make Australia what they are today were imported wholesale from Britain. We inherited our liberal democracy, our market economy, our emphasis on individual rights, the common law, and our public ethic of toleration from Britain. What institutions we did not directly get from Britain we adopted from other British colonies—for instance, Australian federalism was modelled on the American and Canadian examples. Yet British history is in precipitous decline in Australian undergraduate history faculties.

So what has replaced it? For a long time undergraduate history subjects have tended towards specialisation. Rather than broad, 'survey' overviews of historical periods of nations and civilisations, even many first year subjects direct their focus to narrow, thematic topics. For instance, it is common to find the history of human rights, or environmental history, or genocide. To be certain, many survey subjects remain. But the era of systematic historical undergraduate knowledge is largely over. More universities teach popular culture than intellectual history. Film history is offered at more universities than British history.

Specialist subjects are necessary and valuable. Indigenous history is important. The history of gender and sexuality matters. The history of film is fascinating. But is it proportionately more important than Australia's institutional history?

British history is worth dwelling on for no other reason than its role in the establishment of Australian institutions. Its absence says perhaps less about the interests of students and teachers at universities than about the way we understand the role of the history and our relationship to the past.

Some clue to this is found in the fact that history courses were overwhelmingly dominated by subjects on twentieth century history. Of 739 subjects, fully 308 focused on the twentieth century. Just 189 covered the later modern period, which we define as 1788 to 1900. Indeed, if we exclude ancient history subjects, which in many institutions are offered in separate courses, then there are more discernibly twentieth century subjects than the rest of the historical periods combined.

One of the most influential books in the study of history was published by the University of Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield: *The Whig Interpretation of History*, published in 1931. Butterfield's book—more of an essay—is often cited but rarely read. Butterfield criticised what he called 'Whig history', which, as it has come to be popularly understood, implicitly depicted history as a series of progressive advances giving us the world we are today.

The Whig Interpretation of History is stirring polemic but it sparked a small cottage industry of work which has been trying to determine the specific nature of this Whig history that Butterfield wished to avoid. For instance, the only 'Whig' historian he mentioned was the conservative Lord Acton.

In fact, Butterfield's argument was much bolder. He is critical of all history that interprets the past in the light of the present. He is critical of abridgement and short-cuts in historical narrative—indeed, in Butterfield's opinion the more history is condensed for the reader's benefit, the more Whiggish it inevitably becomes.

It is hard to disagree with the claim that historical events should be understood in their own context, as they were understood at the time and, at least ideally, without importing anachronistic frames of reference from our own age. Yet Butterfield flirts with the notion of history as being almost entirely disconnected from contemporary concerns. The historian should look for discontinuities. The study of history is the practice of alienating oneself from the present, searching for distances, not closing gaps.

In many ways, as the historian Marshall Poe writes, Butterfield's argument is a neat polemical summary of the almost always unstated philosophy that underpins modern historical practice: 'It can easily be demonstrated that these traits—what we will call discontinuity, empiricism, and neutrality—are indeed not specific to Butterfield's thought, but are in fact the most basic ontological, epistemic, and ethical standards of modern historical writing.'

By empiricism, Poe means the commitment to sources and evidence on which historians rest their judgment. Neutrality refers to research objectivity—in practice, an ethical ideal to strive for.

Of the three, discontinuity has the most significance. The lesson here is that there are so many



differences between our time and the past, that to compare the present to the past is to mislead. For instance, in our book *Magna Carta: the Tax Revolt that Gave us Liberty*, we describe the complex mixture of thirteenth century fees and charges and financial payments between vassals and lords and barons and kings, as taxes. It might be said, as indeed some historians have said, that such a description is anachronistic. To call these payments 'taxes' is to apply modern ideas about citizen government fiscal relations in an era where they not apply. In thirteenth century England, the state did not levy taxes for public goods.

Yet acknowledging the conceptual distinctions between tax in our time and the network of levies and charges of eight hundred years ago does not preclude us from identifying relationships between our system and the past, and between medieval England and other medieval societies.

A more radical position which can be drawn out from Butterfield's anti-Whig philosophy is a rejection of the notion of 'origin' stories in history. When discussing the Magna Carta, perhaps more consequential generalisation concerns the origins of parliament. One Chapter in the Magna Carta prohibited the king from imposing 'scutages' and 'aids' without the common counsel of the kingdom. Over time, this evolved into parliamentary control over taxation. But in its specific, discontinuous context it does not. Is it right to say that this was the origin of parliament as we know it today? There were so many specific and diverse inputs into the evolution of parliament that perhaps to do so is an anachronistic and ahistorical confusion, imposing categorisations where none can apply.

Butterfield clearly did not hold fully to the philosophy expressed in his most famous book. One of his other books was titled *The Origins of Modern Science*. But the approach he counselled—to seek alienation to understand the past—has, it seems left its mark.

While it is true that much university history teaching is about the acquisition of profession skills—assessment of evidence, scholarly writing and so forth—the bulk is about passing on knowledge of history. And while professional historical practice does require the historian to try to place themselves in a world different to their own, the task of teaching history is different from 'doing' history, just as expression is different to thought.

We do not make the world anew every generation. Our institutions, our ideas, our attitudes, our culture, are all *historical*, in that they are derived from the past, but are not of the past. If every past culture is alien—if the discontinuities of the past outshine all else—it might seem of no consequence whether British history is taught or not. But the historian lives in the present. History students live in the present. We are interested in history because of the present. *Origins* matter.

The anniversary of the First World War has sparked a broad cultural conversation in Australia about the meaning of its participation in that conflict, the Anzac legend, and the nature and symbolic representation of Gallipoli. That conversation is happening in public. When young people flock to the Dawn Service or travel to that famous Turkish peninsula, they are participating in a debate about the meaning of Australia's past.

And when 49 per cent of Australians between 18 and 29, when asked by the 2015 Lowy Institute



poll, cannot agree that democracy is preferable to any other form of government, they are implicitly engaged in a dialogue with Australia's liberal democratic past, where those liberal democratic institutions came from, and the value we put on them.

There are reasons to be optimistic. The popularity of history in our bookshops, the engagement with the Anzac tradition, and the increasing localised historical awareness (symbolised by the explosion in family histories) shows an Australian public desperate to understand their roots. The history profession is keenly aware of this popular demand. Yet that demand is about origins, not discontinuities.

As Edmund Burke wrote, 'People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors.' But then again Burke was, as A.J.P. Taylor put it, a corrupt 'Whig hack'.