



The End of History

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In 1993, after the passing of Laurie R. Gardiner—a historian and lecturer at the University of Melbourne—his friends, family, and former colleagues established an academic prize in his honour.

The prize, the trust record says, was to be awarded ‘annually to the undergraduate student enrolled in the department who submits the best essay in early modern British History (1400-1700)’—a reflection of Gardiner’s own speciality: the English Reformation.

It wasn’t the only one of its kind. The Donald Mackay Prize for British history was established in 1979, after another history lecturer tragically drowned. The Marion Boothby Exhibition Prize for British History was established in 1996.



You have to wonder what happens to these prizes each year now, because since the 1990s, something unthinkable has happened. British history at the University of Melbourne has died.

In 1997, the University offered seven British history subjects. By 2007, the number had declined to just two. The last British history unit—on the seventeenth century—was purged in 2009. Apparently, none of the British history prizes have been awarded for four years.

British history is just one casualty of the bloodbath. Two decades ago, the University of Melbourne offered one of the best undergraduate history courses in Australia. The first year subjects gave sweeping introductions on topics like ‘Great Civilizations’, ‘Tudor England’, ‘Medieval History’, and more. Almost 70 units were offered at second and third year level, which ranged from strange specialist topics—like ‘Representations of Gender’—to old-fashioned names-and-dates units on ancient Rome, the crusades, various epochs of British history, and much more.

Contrast this to now. In 2014, Melbourne offered less than 30 undergraduate history units, most of which are eclectic and highly specialised. Thankfully you can still study the world wars. If you like, you can also study specialised topics like ‘Rebels and Revolutionaries,’ ‘Pirates and Their Enemies,’ and ‘Cold War Cultures in Asia.’ But if you want to study the English Civil War, the High Middle Ages, or even colonial Australia, Melbourne University is not for you. And if you want a good general knowledge of human history since the fall of Rome in the west, you’ll have to do a lot of extra reading.

Which gives rise to a question: Melbourne is clearly out of the game at the moment, but if somebody wants to study—say—the English Reformation or Civil War, or perhaps the High Middle Ages, is it possible to do so anywhere in Australia? Or if someone wants to get a good knowledge of general history, where is the best place to go? How exactly do history degrees compare?

The short answer is that it depends on what you’re looking for. Australia’s biggest history department is easily that of the University of Sydney, which offers almost 90 different undergraduate history subjects. It is the only university in Australia that offers a history degree with a subject range comparable to that offered by Melbourne in the 1990’s. Trailing a long distance behind is Monash University and the University of Western Sydney, which both offer about 60 different units, and the University of New South Wales, which offers around 50.

Ancient history is faring relatively well in some areas. After ploughing through course handbooks from around the country, I found just nearly two hundred units on Ancient history, which makes it one of the more popular historical epochs. It is strongest in New South Wales— particularly at the University of Sydney and Macquarie University, which both offer it as a degree distinct to ‘normal’ history. It is faring decidedly worse at Melbourne and Monash in Victoria.

Modern history—which here includes the period from the Renaissance to the First World War—is almost as popular as Ancient history based on the number of subjects offered, but these subjects are more evenly dispersed among the universities.

The vast majority of institutions do offer a number of subjects on it, which is presumably a reflection of modern academia's obsession with revolutions, imperialism and colonial studies. Units on the Renaissance, French Revolution, the American Civil War, Imperialism, European expansion, and post-colonialism appear fairly consistently in the handbooks of most universities.

Unsurprisingly, though, it is the twentieth century that takes the prize as the most popular historical period. Indeed, in some small universities— including Flinders University and the University of Charles Darwin—most history units are about the twentieth century.

There are probably many reasons for its popularity. It is the most recent period, and therefore more immediately relevant. Another factor is the apparent attraction of evil dictators. If you are especially keen to study Nazi Germany, you might be satisfied with Monash University, La Trobe University, Flinders University, or the Universities of New South Wales, Queensland and Melbourne.

Another popular twentieth-century topic is genocide. There are about twelve different universities that currently offer subjects on this topic, but if you want to specialise in mass-murders, Monash is the place to go: there you can choose between subjects like 'Genocide,' 'The Holocaust,' 'Final journey: Remembering the Holocaust' and 'The Holocaust in Film.' Similar subjects are offered at postgraduate level.

You may have noticed that I have missed a fairly significant historical period. So have the majority of our universities. Apparently, medieval history is out of fashion in history departments—something that may seem surprising, given how popular the medieval and medieval-fantasy genre currently is in popular culture. Yet the study options currently offered by our universities do not seem reflective of demand. I found less than 40 history units on the medieval era Australia-wide, and most of these are offered by a very select group of universities. Even Macquarie University, which is very strong in ancient history and early Christianity, fails to offer any subjects on the medieval period as part of its history major.

Unsurprisingly, British history is even less popular. It is surprising that the University of New England— which is one of the smallest in Australia, having less than 10,000 students—currently offers the most British history units (five). New England is followed by the University of Sydney, which offers four British history units, and then by the Universities of Queensland and Adelaide and Australian National University, which each offer three.

Even less popular than British history is economic history—a topic which is now rarely offered even by business and economics faculties. The University of Melbourne has only one undergraduate economic history unit—'Generating the Wealth of Nations,' which is a sweeping overview of economic history of the last 500 years. This unit appears to be something of a rarity. Australian National University does offer a five-subject course in economic history, and a few other universities might offer one or two individual subjects as part of their commerce degrees; but this aside, economic history, like British history at the University of Melbourne, is dead.

However, one thing that can be said about almost all the history courses is that there is often very little cohesion. As a general rule, the history units offered by universities are extremely specialised, closely reflecting the interests of the academics who teach them. Some specialised subjects might be an excellent addition to a history course, if they continue to attract students; but in order to actually teach some history, faculties need to balance this with broader, old-fashioned 'names and dates' history subjects. The only university that can really get away with offering a larger proportion of specialised units is perhaps Sydney, and only because its history department is so large.

Some smaller history faculties have indeed recognised this need to offer a general introduction to long-term history at some point in the course. Champion College in New South Wales—Australia's only liberal arts college—offers only eight history units, but together they form a sweeping overview of almost every aspect of Western history from Ancient Greece to the twentieth century.

Most universities, however, offer only specialised units from the first to third year. La Trobe University is perhaps worst in this respect. It offers 'Migration Stories in a Global Context' and 'Myth, Legend and History' as its introductory history units. The senior units include subjects like 'The European Union,' 'Riots and Rebellions,' and 'Andy Warhol's America.' In some respects, this does not resemble a history course at all.

Perhaps the over-specialisation of these courses reflects a change in the way some academics think about history. Traditionally—that is, since antiquity—the purpose of studying history was to explain the present, how the world became the way it is, and learn from past errors. 'Andy Warhol's America' and 'Migration Studies in a global context' are unlikely to help explain how we made it to the twenty-first century—not unless they are put in context. Indeed, it must be difficult to appreciate the significance of such nuanced topics without at least some knowledge of a longer historical narrative.

What specialised subjects like this might do is help students develop 'historical skills'—skills in research and analysis, and something that humanities faculties around Australia promote as a key benefit of studying history. The problem is, research and analytical skills can be developed by studying pretty much any academic discipline. If we want to preserve academic history and actually inspire people to study it, then we should really emphasise the aspects of it that are important. And it is indeed important, because our understanding of history shapes our understanding of the present. To use the famous Burkean quote that appears on the University of Melbourne's website, 'Those who don't know history are destined to repeat it.' Explaining the present, therefore, should really be the primary goal of any undergraduate history course. This is best achieved not chiefly through the study of disconnected specialist units, but through acquiring a much broader understanding of the rise and fall of civilisations—especially our own.