

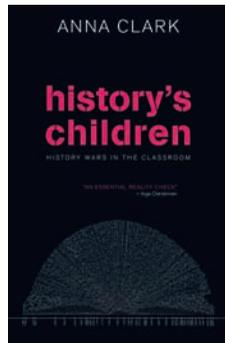
News flash: war exciting, federation dull

Richard Allsop reviews

History's children: History wars in the classroom

by Anna Clark

(University of New South Wales Press, 2008, 178 pages)



This would be an easy book to ridicule. Manning Clark's granddaughter leaves the politically correct university staff room and discovers that in real world school classrooms students love learning about war and hate learning indigenous history.

However, that would be churlish. Anna Clark deserves credit for actually going out into the field and recording the views of students about the Australian history they have been taught, even when those views clearly disagree with her own preconceptions. On the Anzacs she 'wasn't expecting them to express such passion when talking about the topic' and when they explained their overwhelming boredom with indigenous history 'to be honest, their views came as a bit of a surprise'.

This is not Clark's first writing about how the history wars have impacted on Australian schools, having contributed a chapter on the topic to Stuart Macintyre's highly partisan 2003 book *The History Wars*.

For *History's Children*, Clark conducted focus groups with 182 students (in groups of five and six), from years nine to twelve, at 34 schools located in every state and territory; with a reasonable mix of government and non-government, and metropolitan and rural. She also interviewed teachers and bureaucrats. While she attempted to talk to education ministers, oddly none were available for interview.

Along with indigenous history and war, the other Australian history topic to which Clark devotes a full chapter is fed-

eration; which students find as dull as indigenous history and for similar reasons. It keeps popping up at different year levels, has repetitive and vague content, and lacks the drama and international significance that makes war such an engaging topic for teenagers.

The overwhelming sentiment of the contemporary students is that Australian history is important, but dull. In considering this finding, it would have been valuable if Clark had done some more questioning of students' attitudes to their experiences being taught the history of countries other than Australia. It is a failing of many participants on both sides of the history wars, that there has been too great a focus on the ideological content of what is taught about Australia, rather than considering the even more fundamental question of what proportion of school history should actually be about Australia.

The other concern with Clark's work is her unshakable assumption that learning facts is inherently dull. Interestingly, most of the anti-facts comments she reports from the classroom come from teachers, not students. Teachers argue that it is hard to teach facts and dates 'on a Friday afternoon in a class of noisy, tired teenagers', as if teaching a more nebulous curriculum would be easier. Yet there is Tahlia, a student at a school in outer Melbourne, who would like to learn more about our Prime Ministers, a sentiment shared by Edie at a public school in central Australia.

Clark at least acknowledges the existence of such children, and cites the further example of Colin, a year twelve stu-

dent in Perth, who said 'I like textbooks because the information's there and you just learn it'. In a spirit of understanding Clark says 'there's no doubt these students need to be catered for—they feel much more comfortable with a concrete, content-oriented history lesson', but hastens to add 'I want to emphasis (sic) that they were a very small minority of the students I spoke with'.

Naturally, the education establishment share Clark's anti-facts bias. NSW Board of Studies head and History Summit participant, Jenny Lawless, argues against 'rote learning facts ... is a very lower order skill'. Instead, she wants students 'to actually engage in history' as part of what Clark refers to as 'historical literacy', something that 'includes a rich taxonomy of historical skills'.

Nobody would argue that at university—or even in years eleven and twelve—those who have elected to do history should be able to do far more than rote learn facts. However, in trying to develop these analytic schools in earlier years, there is a risk that students learn little actual history. One of Britain's leading historians, David Strachey, has argued that far too much emphasis is placed on the process of discovery about historical events, rather than the events themselves. He argues that the study of original documents and the search for evidence should not come until university level. He asks 'what's the point in having a teacher if not to teach students what the facts are?'

Obviously, the choice of which historical facts and dates to teach can be contentious, but at least armed with a few facts about the history of Australia and the world, students might feel they had gained something from their time in the history classroom.

Clark has performed a valuable service in showing what some of the problems with the current history curriculum and teaching methods are. She may not have the answers as to how to improve the status quo, but that in no way invalidates her findings.

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