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Public History; A Cheap Chronicle for an Imagined Public?

Malcolm MacLean

Paper presented to
'Writing in Public'

Department of Communication and Media Studies Symposium
Central Queensland University
October 28, 1995.

This paper examines the way in which public history is defined and inter-relates with academic history. The attempted colloquialization of professional history by those advocating public history has coincided with the end of the welfare state. These factors are connected: the qualification inflation so central to meritocracy has resulted in a myriad of graduate degrees and no academic jobs. At the same time, various public bodies have fallen victim to the changes resulting from the hegemony of finance capital and have sought to enshrine themselves through official records – often called histories, usually chronicles. This demise of public institutions has given non-academic professional historians a space to work. To legitimate their work, they have invented a new sub-discipline: Public History.

But first, a brace of validating divergences:

Tariq Ali: The public intellectual is a figure who seems to be disappearing.

Edward Said: No, no, not at all. I mean, the world is full of, not so much intellectuals – I call them experts and professionals. That is, the great threat to intellectual freedom and intellectual performance is the extraordinary pressure placed on one to commodify his or her skills or expertise in a given field like foreign policy, or foreign policy about Africa or foreign policy about Latin America, right. And by virtue of that, then belonging to a community of experts who are selling their wares to the establishment where the principal goal in mind is not to say what the alternatives to the present and the past (are) but to maintain the status quo. So it's not a question of the public intellectuals disappearing, I mean Henry Kissinger's on the television all the time, Brezinski's on the television all the time, Paul Johnson is on the television all the time. These are public intellectuals who talk the language of the market place, who represent the ideas of power that rule the world in which we live.

TA: But Sartre and Bertrand Russell aren't there.

ES: Exactly, it's that kind of intellectual, the dissenting intellectual, that I think has disappeared largely because the system neither wants to nor can in the end accommodate this person.

And, from closer to home:

If Australia and New Zealand did not exist, it would have been necessary for social science to invent them. Take a large sample of people from the United Kingdom and settle them in another

hemisphere, as far as possible away from the motherland. Separate them into two batches, placing one in a large territory and the other in a small one. Choose different indigenous populations to intrude upon: here a diversity of hunter-gatherers, there a nation of cultivators. Found one colony with free citizens and the other with prisoners. Vary the mixtures of English, Scots and Irish. Stir and observe. What insights that experiment must yield into society and culture! What discoveries to test about empire, environment, race and civilisation!

Yet there they are, these two countries with those potentially instructive similarities and differences, and comparative studies are so few that their paucity is itself a fact requiring explanation. Scholars in other continents have been busy at their own agendas while Australian and New Zealand students have been afflicted by a kind of reciprocal amnesia which they share with compatriots at large.

Most of my evidence for this argument will be drawn from New Zealand. It is not laziness or ignorance of the local situation that prompts me to adopt this approach, but a firmly held belief that the two countries have much to learn from each other, if only we can get beyond the blithe naivety that we are so similar that it barely warrants discussion.

What is public history?

In the early 1990s historians in both Australia and NZ were all aflutter with talk of 'public history'. *Historical Studies* published a special issue in 1991, and the New Zealand Historical Association Conference in May of that year featured keynote speakers addressing the question. Much of the debate, however, has failed to define the topic under discussion. For most, 'public history' is merely the product of research carried out by professional historians working outside the academy.

Perhaps the clearest articulation of 'public history' is by Graeme Davison. He takes a much less celebratory line than many others refusing to see 'public history' as the messiah promising to usher in the promised land of milk and honey serving an increasingly stale academic history. He suggests that 'public history' has its Australasian origins in a pragmatic and populist perception of a growing interest in the past with the growth of family and local history as well as an increasing concern for 'heritage'. Furthermore, 'public history' offered the prospect of jobs for those graduates excluded from academia by the reduction in the growth of Universities. Perhaps that should be the downgrading of the humanities and social sciences in the age of fiscal return and economic rationalism? But more of that later.

John Rickard sees 'public history' in more millenarian terms:

For the ultimate justification of devoting a special number to Public History is not simply that the particular issues are important and...relevant, but that the emergence of Public History and its siblings signifies an identity crisis for the discipline itself, and is evidence of a renegotiation of the relationship between history and the community....Public History poses questions about many of these practices: but it also insists that history has a future, not only in the academy, but in the real world.

This is almost identical rhetoric to that used to justify a stronger role for policy analysis and

interventions by cultural studies practitioners.

To be sure, 'public history' poses a number of crucial questions about the entrenched historical method and historians' sources, but Rickard's claims are concerning for those of us who believe that the academy is part of the 'real world'. Furthermore, inherent in the label 'public history' is the belief that the rest of us do 'private history'. There can be no doubt that academic historians spend the vast majority of our time talking to ourselves, Geoffrey Blainey notwithstanding. But, the low citation rate raises doubts about the extent to which even hear ourselves.

The term 'public history' has a peculiarly American resonance about it. Robert Kelly coined the term in 1975 when he asserted that:

In its simplest meaning Public History refers to the employment of historians and the historical method outside of academia.

Kelly invokes two senses of 'public' here that we need to unravel in the 1990s if we are to grasp the full implication of this 'sub-discipline'. Firstly, there is the contrast with academic history in that the knowledge is made publicly available, and secondly there is the suggestion that such history is done or written in the service of the public or for the common good. Both these uses beg the question: who asks the questions the historian answers and who pays the bills? In other words, in whose interest is this historical research conducted, and what happens if they object to the answers? If it comes down to the money question, those who can afford to pay us what we think we deserve as professionals are those who rule and those who dominate through their social power.

'Public history' is not the only supposedly democratic trend running through the discipline. From the UK we have 'people's history'. Whereas 'public history' can be seen as a job creation program for graduates, 'people's history' is founded on the notion of the democratisation of historical praxis. Public history is designed to take history to the masses by telling their story, while people's history is designed to make the masses historians by letting them tell their stories. In the wake of the spirit of 1968 and impacts of the new social histories, people's history has had a significant impact in both Australia and New Zealand. Despite a desire to 'return history to the people' the intellectuals and academics held control through the flexing to ideological muscle in arcane debates on topics of structural Marxism and the place of human agency.

The third strand is the attempt to apply historical method to public policy issues. The 'applied historians' have tended to flounder on either the shoals of positivism or the reefs of vague contextualisation as the predictive powers of historical research were even more clearly exposed as the wishful thinking of those who seem to believe that we are doomed to repeat our pasts and in a *Deus ex machina* fashion believe they can save us from our fates.

If 'public history' has no clear structural or intellectual framework or tradition, does it have particular textual characteristics? The written products of the professional work of public historians are as diverse as there are employment contracts. They include histories of recently amalgamated boroughs, centennial histories of government departments and other public sector institutions, reports on native title claims, museum and art gallery exhibitions, analyses of claims for the preservation or conservation of stately and not so stately houses as well as factories,

mines and shearing sheds, and analyses of trends in social indicators as parts of social policy debates. The documents are presented as books, tapes, videos, exhibitions, pictures, reports and CD-Rom interactive discs (well, maybe one day). Their audiences are wildly diverse and their social engagement and impact even more so. In terms of both production and consumption, it is hard to find a common textual basis for 'public history'.

At this point, I am inclined to agree with Chris Healy that 'public history' is a difficult term because it has no clear meaning. Its claim to specialist status is based on its mission to satisfy social rather than scholarly demands for historical knowledge in that it seeks to clarify elements of popular memory through an invocation of historical method. Yet academic historians often make the same claims for their work hence their corrective interjections into public debate. This justification maintains the scholarly/popular distinction and sees history as isolated from the people. The problem with this is that we know that historical concepts are widely disseminated through popular consciousness. Indeed, so widely that much public discourse is now framed around the need to return to the traditional ways of yore. So, is history's true mission the suppression or destruction of memory and public history's true mission the saviour, as some claims suggest? Yet who pays the public historian and who sets the examination questions? What public is served?

Bring on the Cavalry: The Arrival of Public History

For the time being, these will have to remain rhetorical questions as we move to consider the imperatives leading to the creation of 'public history' in Australasia. Perhaps the best way to do this is to look at who can be considered to be public historians. In the mid 1970s the number of independent or government historians in New Zealand were little more than a hand-full – I can think of fewer than ten.

The Professional Historians' Association of New Zealand/Aotearoa (PHANZA) now claims that there are over 150 full time professionals. Many of these are working in the 'treaty industry' dealing with native title claims. Most professionals are based in Wellington and work in organisations as diverse as the Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongarewa, the Historic Places Trust, the Waitangi Tribunal, the Crown Forest Rental Trust, the Crown Law Office, the Treaty of Waitangi Policy Unit, the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography and the Historical Atlas of New Zealand. In addition, Treaty claimants often employ historians and the Historical Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs now has over 20 projects in hand. The 'treaty industry' employs over 30 research historians in Wellington alone.

Although the native title question is not so significant in Australia, where cases are fought through the courts, there has been a massive expansion of 'public history' here as well. As with the rest of the White Commonwealth this has included employees of government departments, various quangos (especially those involved in resolving the claims of colonised peoples), a small number of independent scholars, and those working in sites such as Australia's Radio National documentary unit.

The other key group are those working in the museum & art gallery sectors. As competition over the nature, form and content of national histories has intensified museums have become less a storehouse of national treasures and more obviously a participant in historical consciousness making. The result is that they have had to ensure that some of their staff could engage with the

key historical and social debates in their areas. Museums must create the narrative they need for the success of specific shows. As such, they need to imagine their publics, and then find a method of inventing them through a particular show. As recent events at the Smithsonian concerning their Hiroshima exhibition and their quincentennial show in 1992 have shown, they cannot afford to be too innovative in the public they imagine.

Museums and state bodies constrain their historians in ways we are more used to seeing critics of social policy within government agencies. So, back to the question: which public? At the risk of sounding like an exceptionally boring old fashioned Marxist, the state is not democratic but exists to ensure that the rich and powerful stay rich and powerful. This is so despite the grand hopes of many for the social democratic project so successfully scuttled by the economic rationalists in the 1980s. This is not to suggest that the state has become a monolithic neo-liberal entity. There is still a resistive potential within certain state organs, but less so than in the past. In the case of public history, the failure to address such a basic question as that of its public's identity undermines its claim to some sort of independent or valid, let alone critical, status.

The BeanCounters Strike Back: The Political Economy of Public History

This does not mean, however, that the debates around public history do not have validity. There are three key issues that are exposed by the 'public history' debate: the accountability of history, the relationship between the academy and the polity, and the historian's use of sources.

At the heart of the rise of 'public history' is the relationship between the academy and the polity. In Australasia and in the UK the rise of the public historian is directly tied to the collapse of the welfare state, the disorganisation of capitalism, and the increasing dominance of finance capital. It is now a truism of economic analyses that since the 1960s there has been a marked shift in economic dominance from manufacturing capital to finance capital. Finance capital is less connected to a state due to its greater potential for movement in that there is no ownership of material goods and fixed plant, only investment that can be withdrawn at any time. This need for mobility saw attacks on the state. State spending needed to fall to give financiers control over a greater proportion of the wealth. In countries with a state in the European (rather than American) tradition this meant the reduction of spending on social services and a decrease in the proportion of wealth held by or returned to workers. This demand for an intensification of the rate of profit lies at the heart of Rupert Murdoch's recent outburst about Australia's 'disgraceful' economy.

For the Australian tertiary education sector the attacks began, in a concerted manner, in the early 1980s. The fundamental changes hit with the Dawkins reforms leading to a shift in funding sources for Australian Universities between the mid 1980s where 12% of income was from industry contracts to 1991 where 55% of University income was from the Commonwealth. Not surprisingly arts and social science faculties have come under increasing pressure during this period as funding levels have fallen.

The second strand in the political economy of public history flows from the changing nature of the labour market under neo-liberal hegemony. An effect of the new right sweep through the English speaking OECD has been a profound transformation of academia's labour market relations. We have seen a sort of proletarianisation of the academy, most clearly marked in the expansion of short term, low wage, super exploited (overwhelmingly women) contract workers now teaching in

every university department. For those of us who grew up in the British model welfare state this is a real shock. We are used to the state looking out for us. The relative underdevelopment of the state in the US explains the greater emphasis on professionalism there as opposed to the quest for an alliance with the welfare state.

The third strand of the political-economic bundle is a consequence of educational expansion. Simply stated, as more people entered higher levels of education, their qualifications became worth less. This qualification inflation is inherent in the meritocracy. The result is that we have produced more graduates than the appropriate sectors of the economy require.

Is History Unique and Is It Coping? The Public History Debates and Historians' Sources

Historians were far from the first to recognise this shift in the use of their academic training. The crisis for anthropology occurred in the mid seventies where, as in the mid fifties, there was a marked oversupply of anthropology graduates in the US. The response of US anthropology in the 1970s was to begin courses in applied anthropology, whereupon the discipline entered into debates not unlike history.

In response to this debate, the developers of the MA in Applied Anthropology at the University of Southern Florida turned their critical perspectives on themselves and found that at the core of the new applied anthropology, defined as work in short-term contracts with public service agencies, was the abandonment of the discipline's central workstyle - participant observation. This prompted the organisers to consider whether the discipline could survive when one of its defining characteristics had been abandoned.

This has a clear and direct application to the debate around public history in its challenge to the discipline's sources. We historians like to think we are getting quite good at using new sources, yet our use of illustrations is often to break the pages of text and indeed often counteracts the argument. The written word is unchallenged in the discipline, so much so that Arthur Marwick's *Culture in Britain Since 1945* contains nine reproductions of oil paintings and no other illustrations, yet 'art', as in painting, is one of the main subjects of the book. Compare this to the lavish and well integrated use of illustrations in Binney, Bassett and Olssen's *Te Tangata me Te Whenua* - a general history of colonial NZ. We seldom use sound recordings, despite the hopes of oral historians, while film and video are admitted but only if there is a written document as well. The key sign that we are no good at non-documentary sources is that no-one seems to know how to reference them. There are, of course, a few exceptions offering a small glimmer of hope, such as the work of the TV History Workshop and the Baltimore Neighbourhood Heritage Project.

.G.BINNEY1.TIF;5.769";3.991";TIFF

.G.BINNEY2.TIF;5.769";3.838";TIFF

Fig 1: Pages 192 & 193 (top) and 196 & 197, Binney, Bassett and Olszen. Note the integration of text and illustration as well as the detailed captions.

We are absolutely terrified of other sorts of sources. Marilyn Lake, for instance, has argued that historians have largely ignored non-literate sources. Her challenge is as much the public history as it is to the traditional forms of academic scholarship with her assertion historians are unable to see beyond the written document while public history is " politically conservative, elitist and masculinist".

Despite its democratic rhetoric, public history has in the main ignored the new social histories – with the obvious exception of projects such as those based on working class rather than trade union history or community studies such as Janet McCalman's *Struggletown* the status of which as public history is debateable. Lake is correct to assert that public history is conservative. The obvious objection to this and the clearest exception is that work produced around native title claims in NZ, Australia, Canada and the US with an exciting new growth in this area in the so-called new South Africa.

Academic historians tend to be very uncomfortable with 'public history'. While making supportive noises in public, the common room discussions are disparaging. We used to find it easy to look down on non-academic historians admitting the few trained scholars and shunting the 'hobbyists' off local history societies. Now, suddenly, we have a burgeoning sector of professionals outside our control.

While some try to find a intellectual arrogance in the academy here, we would do well to look at the fiscal factor. This entails taking note of the impact of the commercial consultancy trend on the work of academic historians. In Australian Universities the growth of the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) program based on industry links coincides with the reduction in public funding of research. The crucial factor here is that the humanities and social sciences tend to be underfunded by ARC type institutions. The scientistic notion of ARC research criteria means that it is likely that more academic historians be forced towards commercial funding unless they are happy to see the denigration of research as teaching loads continue to grow. The result of this probable trend is a weakening of distinction between academic and public history.

Public History: Snake Oil or Messiah?

On my harsh days, I see public history as little short of a fraud that relies on a confusion over the meaning of 'public' to fabricate its legitimacy. It pretends to address the general public, but instead chronicles and legitimates the activities of public bodies.

On my more accommodating days, I worry that we are inventing a new concept based not on what the historians do, but who pays them to do it. I reject the term 'public history' because it lacks intellectual rigour. Hazel Hitson Weidman rejects the label applied anthropologist because it

suggests that anthropological applications were "unidirectional and transitory". For her, "applied anthropology is a process" facilitating inter-disciplinary transactions.

Public history is in a very similar position while its strategic program embodies two problems. Firstly, extra-academic history is not autonomous but its success is a consequence of the success of academic history. Secondly, it must address the ethical question concerning the use of history.

'Public history' is doomed to a life of non-definition and continual problems. It is mediated by a series of economic, social and political demands from a range of parties as well as being subject to the vagaries of political-economy. Its liminality means that constant redefinition is required. Public history is not a sub-speciality of the discipline but a process of demands on historical knowledge mediated through concerns about who processes knowledge, in what context, at whose behest, for whom, as well as through methodological questions and the form and nature of the results. Therefore Public History neither rescues the voice of the oppressed nor is it the new intellectual powerhouse – both ignore the network of tensions at its core. I suspect that the same argument could be made for 'cultural policy'.

If I am wrong on my generous days and public history is a fraud, it is a valuable fraud. It keeps screeds of graduates employed when there is a shrinking market in academic posts, and it gives those seeking change in the body politic the raw material they need to construct their arguments in favour of those transformations. This applies to government departments, those researching the claims of indigenous peoples, and museum workers.

The invention of new sub-disciplines – such as public history, regional media studies, cognitive anthropology and the like – is merely an extension of the tyranny of disciplinary specificity. Academic historians contempt for public history is little better than their contempt for family or local history: in each case it derives from the non-academic status of the practitioners. Academic historians are in a quandary over public history – on the one hand their status as the public historians is challenged while their contempt is neutered by the professional training of the new disciplines' practitioners.

A Conversation with Edward Said Bandung Ltd for Channel Four (Tariq Ali, Producer), 1994.

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Robert Kelly, 'Public History: Its Origins, Nature and Prospects' *The Public Historian* 1(1), 1975. p 16

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Geoffrey Maslen and Luke Slattery Why Our Universities Are Failing: Crisis in the Clever

Country Wilkinson Books, Melbourne. 1994. p 41.

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Judith Binney, Judith Bassett and Erik Olssen Te Tangata me Te Whenua/The People and the Land Wellington, Allen and Unwin, 1990

Linda Shopes 'The Baltimore Neighbourhood Heritage Project: Oral History and Community Involvement' Radical History Review 25, 1981 and the full list of the productions of the Television History Workshop Centre, such as The Brixton Tapes, focussed on a series of interviews with residents of Brixton dealing with the riots in 1981 and released in April of that year.

Marilyn Lake - 'Historical Homes' (p 49) in Rickard and Spearritt, pp 46-54

Janet McCalman Struggletown: Public Life and Private in Richmond 1900-1965 Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1985.

Hazel Hitson Weidman 'In Praise of the Double Bind Inherent in Anthropological Application' (pp 105-117) in Angrosino. p 105.

ibid, p 114

The term 'extra-academic history' is Chris Healey's, op cit. I like it.