

HISTORY'S CHILDREN: HISTORY WARS IN THE CLASSROOM, BY ANNA CLARK.
Sydney: New South, 2008; vii + 178 pp; notes, index; paperbound, \$29.95.

Anna Clarke has a knack for writing about topical subjects and choosing pithy titles. *History's Children: History Wars in the Classroom* is a thoroughly researched and well crafted study of the teaching and learning of our national history in Australian high schools. Major emphases are the teaching of Federation and civics, Australians' involvement in war and Aboriginal history. Clarke's discussion incorporates the views of students and teachers, gained through a series of interviews methodically conducted in a broad cross section of schools. These are compared to the ideas of education bureaucrats and politicians to give a dynamic overview of the expectations, practices and policy pressures that bear on Australian history education in Australian schools. It is a timely publication, the debates sponsored by the Howard government having been continued in Rudd's move towards a national curriculum. Clarke's final chapters, dealing with the mechanics of implementing a national curriculum and with desirable teaching practice will be of particular interest to anyone engaged in the process of formulating policy on Australian history and implementing it in the classroom.

When Clarke collaborated with Stuart Macintyre on *The History Wars* in 2003 she produced an apposite study of public historiography. It placed historical discourse within the context of what was by then referred to as 'the culture wars'. At the time I remember thinking that, intellectually stimulating though the debate was, any war that was waged in *Quadrant*, *The Quarterly Essay* and in opinion pieces would necessarily be a limited engagement. At least there wouldn't be many civilian casualties. *History's Children* goes beyond the opposing views of ideologues, giving voice to teachers and students. As someone who teaches history to high school students I found the book entertaining, sometimes reassuring and sometimes challenging. It is certainly illuminating. Clarke candidly discusses the discrepancy between people's classroom attitudes and what might be described as a more academic outlook. She says of students' negative views on Aboriginal history:

To be honest, their views came as a bit of a surprise. Indigenous issues still make headlines in Australia, the history of race relations

continues to be at the fore of public debate, and if anything, we're as far from reconciliation in any sense of the word as ever . . . (p65)

One wonders how many students read the opinion pieces written by either side of 'the history wars'? How many Australians, for that matter? *History's Children* puts an Australian Research Council grant to excellent use, investigating what is actually taught and learned in schools.

Much care has been taken to preserve an impartial perspective. For instance, Clarke has been kind to her interviewees. She quotes one teacher (p16) as saying: 'you've got to make it interesting by not focussing on facts and figures and those sorts of things. You've got to make it real...' without pointing out the apparent non sequitur. She is kinder still to Brendan Nelson, who defined Australian values by reference to Simpson and his donkey: Clarke gives an analysis of Nelson's political motivation but makes nothing of the rather laughable fact that John 'Simpson' Kirkpatrick was an Englishman who absconded from the merchant navy.

Nelson's gaff was significant for more than comic value. It says something about the historiography of history teaching in schools. When Nelson was a boy they generally didn't teach Australian history, although I'm not sure this excuses him so many years later. (Ten points from Hufflepuff!) Nor did John Howard or Kevin Rudd benefit from a mandatory Australian history syllabus. When Julie Bishop declared that all children 'should know why the British transported convicts to Australia and who Australia's first prime minister was' (p36) she appeared to be urging a return to the teaching of good old fashioned knowledge but it wasn't the syllabus she studied as a child. When Howard insisted that the nation should know who Edmund Barton was I doubt that he intended we revive the protectionism and the arbitration system he was so busy dismantling. Pedagogy, too, has changed markedly. Clarke continually frames her discussion in terms of student engagement, but it would be worth noting that the older generation of commentators were rarely required to be interested in the subjects they were taught at school. I note that Clarke considers the old approach still pertains to mathematics (p36).

Indeed, it is curious that Clarke's book is not based on much historical research. The interviews have been combined with public commentary to give a multivalent understanding of 'where we are' but there isn't much of a sense of how we got here. History as it is taught in schools, as well as what is said about it in the public domain, cannot be taken out of historical context. One

wonders if those ideologues who insist on their view of history hold their views so passionately because they arrived at them themselves. Even in the academy Australian history courses are still something of a novelty. Crowley's edited volume *A New History of Australia* (1974) marked the beginning of a dynamic expansion of academic enquiry into Australian history. Should we wonder that the excitement young academics felt when they were 'discovering' their own history isn't felt so keenly when transmitted a generation or so later? I hoped to find a table comparing changes to state syllabi, now and over time, but alas there is no appendix. Indeed, there is no bibliography.

Clarke's book also raises questions about the teaching of 'national histories'. Federation, for instance, bores the socks off kids. Clarke maintains that there 'seems to be an overwhelming sense among students that federation doesn't cut it compared with other countries' proud beginnings' (p21) and describes the problems teachers face in engaging their students. For instance, there is no scope within the syllabus and no time on the timetable to put federation within the context of the English, French and American revolutions. In New South Wales, federation is taught over a half dozen periods which might culminate in a source task. Emphasising the truly interesting parts such as state's rights, the franchise, assumptions of a white Australia and the short shrift given to Aborigines engages students but results in distortion. More so, because no comparative study is possible.

It isn't just Federation that needs a global context to make it more interesting to students. One of Clarke's interviewees preferred to study Australia's wars 'because it's not just related to Australia, it's international' (p60). Clarke astutely observes that military history is central to the teaching of a 'national history'; that the inculcation of 'Anzac' is mandatory, well funded and perhaps a little sinister. Ironically, though, it is in this most nationalist feature of this national history that students are likely to encounter global events. One is reminded, as one is perhaps reminded too often, of Plato's parable of the shadows on the wall. Students may get a distorted glimpse of the Russian Revolution if they pay strict attention to the penultimate lesson of the Great War (if they miss the ultimate lesson they'll get a surprise when Hitler appears out of the Weimar Republic) and they might hear of a communist or two being thumped by the New Guard. But they won't really study communism until Menzies tries to ban the CPA. Too often 'fear of communism' is little more than a bullet point on a checklist of reasons for

Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. This is not what students want. Students will assiduously take notes on the causes of wars, on ideologies, revolutions and doctrines. They will take these notes even when they are told not to by a teacher who is thinking of assessment. The timetable and the syllabus dictate a more narrow focus; not quite the same narrow focus that saw us march to war for empire or against communism, but narrow nonetheless.

Clarke has done well to write this book. It presents a range of views and raises yet more questions when change in the teaching of Australian History in the nation's classrooms is imminent. Anyone who wants to have a say in how we manage this change should put this book on their reading list.

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