
‘My country’s heart is in the market place’:¹

Tom Stannage interviewed by Peter Read

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Collective memories within small communities have been shaped over generations to winnow out stories that they would rather silence. Through this process communities come to a consensus about a version of the past with which they can comfortably live. These agreed historical stories, which are shaped by social and community forces, show the strength of the warp and weft which interweaves past and present. Yet it is important to understand how a community comes to shape these agreed historical stories.

Tom Stannage was one among many historians in the 1970s uncovering histories of Australia which were to challenge national narratives and community memories. In 1971, Tom returned to Western Australia after writing his PhD in Cambridge with the passion to write

urban history and an understanding that in order to do so, he needed an emotional engagement with place. What he had yet to realize was the power of community memories in Western Australia to shape and preserve ideas about their place.

As part of his research on the history of Perth, Tom saw how the written histories of Western Australia had been shaped by community mythologies – in particular that of the rural pioneer. He identified the consensus or ‘gentry tradition’ in Western Australian writing and named those he saw as its chief purveyors – the historian and State Librarian Dr James Skyes Battye and Professors Frank Crowley and Geoffrey Bolton.

Tom’s histories were framed by his desire to show more complex inter-personal and community relations, experiences that likely drew on his childhood as the son of an Anglican vicar. In teasing out histories of conflict, he showed how the gentry tradition of rural pioneer histories silenced those of race and gender relations, convictism and poverty which were found in both rural and urban areas. His versions of history began to unsettle parts of the Perth community who found the ‘pioneer myth’ framed their consensus world-view and whose families were themselves the living links to these ‘pioneers’.

Tom saw that ‘the danger for any society is that one view of the past may get enshrined as an orthodox, or even authorized version, which by its nature is exclusive and partial and which contains and even cuts down potential alternative visions of the nature of our society.’² However, what Tom hadn’t realised was that in researching alternative versions of the past, he was transgressing the memory of a small and tightly knit community. As he presented his research, Tom began to experience the continuing power of the social and political structures in Western Australia and what people were prepared to do to maintain the status quo.

Tom knew that robust debate was the way that historical knowledge progressed. But in researching and writing alternative histories of Perth he discovered the depth and tenacity of the social and political forces that had hewn their own line between history, myth and community memory. In his 1985 paper ‘Western Australia’s heritage: the pioneer myth’ he reflected that ‘There have been moments in Western Australia’s recent history when those putting an alternative view have been subjected not to the normal criticism that one might expect from within the trade or community, but by efforts made to prevent the publication of material and indeed even the writing of it’.³ Tom had support from some colleagues, including Diane Barwick who was engaged in the development of the journal *Aboriginal History* at the Australian National

University. Barwick wrote to Tom about the Perth community's reaction to his 1985 paper: 'I'm not surprised that you are the subject of libellous attacks by the lunatic right in' Western Australia. She was more surprised that he had not been 'tarred and feathered': 'If they ride you out of town on a rail you can build a humpy in our backyard', she wrote.⁴

While history is necessarily political, too many historians have been subjected to personal attacks for the histories they have written from politicians, their colleagues and the community. Peter Read interviewed Tom in 1991 as part of his research on 'belonging', as he was interested in Tom's sense of place in Western Australia and the suburb where he lived for most of his life, Subiaco. During the interview Tom reflected on the time when his personal and professional integrity was under attack as a result of his attempts to redraw the lines between history, memory and community. A segment of this interview was played at the Australian Historical Association conference in Woollongong in July 2013 in a session organized in honour of Tom. The session theme 'historians under attack' also included Peter Read and Lyndall Ryan, both of whom, like Tom, have experienced deep personal vilification for the histories that they dared to write.

EXTRACT OF INTERVIEW

STANNAGE: ...but the urban thing, I couldn't see how one could write urban history, except at a theoretical level, without an engagement with an urban place that was meaningful. So, in 1971 I came back to Perth on a one-year position as a lecturer in British history. I lectured in British history, finished the PhD thesis which was in the satchel as it were, and immediately determined, in 1973, that I would write a history of Perth, that I would now go back and do the urban history that I so badly wanted to do... And I found that I had an emotional commitment to that. Over the next five or six years I realized that has drawbacks as well. My start point for that was your [Peter Read's] observation about countering different ways of thinking about Australia and presentations of Australia, and problems I had in the mid seventies.

By beginning the history of Perth, and by deciding then and there to move, apart from Crowley altogether who was the great guru on Western Australian history, quite properly so, and then to start with all the primary sources all over again, and with all what I had experienced up to 1973-4 and in 1974 running for the first time my own Australian history course, I began the task of writing the history of Perth.

By 1976 I'd been down to places that no historians had been to – the vaults of the Supreme Court of Western Australia – where I found a West Australian history totally unlike any I had ever experienced.⁵ I had moved from the political pages of the local newspapers to what I came to call the social pages. I don't mean the society pages; I mean pages about the magistrates court proceedings, poor boxes, a whole range of things. By 1975 I was aware, too, of the Henderson report on poverty. It was not released until late 1975, and as you know it has remained on the floor of parliament ever since.⁶

In 1976 I decided I would fire my first shots about what I was discovering about this place that we call Perth in Western Australia, and I did so at a 50th anniversary lecture of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society in Western Australia. It was called 'Uncovering poverty in Australian history'. And I laid out the historiography of poverty internationally, and then to the astonishment of the audience, came in on Western Australia and drew from my research, examples of the way in which capitalist structures generate poverty, capitalist structures alienate Aboriginal peoples etc etc. And the person moving the vote of thanks slammed the paper, the Society refused to publish it initially, they finally agreed to publish it – after all it was one of their half a dozen anniversary addresses, and I had to agree to put dot dot dot dot after the initial of each poor person mentioned. And that's how it was published in the *Journal of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society*.⁷

But I knew from that point what I wanted to do with Perth was going to be problematical for this society, so my engagement with Perth became a double-edged sword. It released I think, a lot of creative energy within me, and certainly enabled me actually to find a way of speaking to the urban history trade internationally. But it also caused me a great deal of pain locally. Indeed when the *People of Perth* [in 1979] was finally published, and it was done so only because of a political situation where two camps of Liberals couldn't decide on who was running the City of Perth, that the book somehow slipped through and was published. But on the very day it was launched at least three or four members of the Perth City Council came up and didn't thank me for the work, but slammed it.

Those sorts of things have remained but I guess I am older and sanguine about these things. The last big burst of knowing that you were running against a history which you were exposing in some sort of way, came in 1985 when I read a paper called 'The Pioneer myth'. It had basically picked up some of the ideas that Marilyn Lake and John Hirst and others had been playing around with. And quite a lot had happened

to me between the mid 1970s and the mid 1980s. But this paper read at a Summer School in Perth, led me to having to defend myself and my practices as an historian to the Vice Chancellor, and to argue why I should not be dismissed and all that sort of thing.

It was a very frightening year. A number of the older families had indeed contacted the Vice Chancellor. The objections were about scholarly research. That is to say that it was felt by some of the old families and certain political groups in Perth that I had misused evidence available in the records of the Batty Library. I will give you a concrete example. I had used the word 'captured' in relation to an expedition led by Charles Harper and others in Western Australia in 1864. I needn't tell you about the way they would take an Aboriginal from one point, and when the Aboriginal had reached the end of his territory he would run away, and they'd catch someone else, and so forth – that system. I thought this was fairly straightforward and I used the word 'captured'. I'm in no doubt that was in fact what they did. I'd also quoted from the Harper diaries in which he talks about the Aborigines he met, one in particular being 'a fit subject for Dr Darwin'. This is a very early reference actually, it was 1864 [and] it showed an alertness that I was quite 'impressed' by. So it was really about what I had written on Aboriginal people. Remember that it follows 1984, the Land Rights debate, the Seaman Land Inquiry in Western Australia etc etc. It was a very sensitive time, mining companies were concerned, the Pastoralist and Graziers Association remonstrated about my paper etc etc etc.

It was all very tense. I had to spend private family money defending myself with barristers letters and things, and it was raised in connection with my application for a Chair here. It was clearly used against me. One academic on this campus read a paper which was an all out attack on me, as an example of what had gone wrong with Australian historical writing. He subsequently read that paper at an Australian Political Studies conference, but the conveners of the conference and editor felt they couldn't publish it and they didn't, which was a good thing.

READ: The standard objection normally against that was 'you are just a blow in from the East, you don't know anything about Western Australian history'. This case is unusual as this was one argument they couldn't use against you, because was that you were a local boy. Did that make it better or worse?

STANNAGE: It made it worse for me. I had to take a private phone line because of abusive calls to my family. I arrived home from work one evening to find my wife shaking after someone had come to our place. I

don't know what they thought they were going to do to me, but this person had just left and gone around the corner as I drove down the street. It was a very fraught time and it put a question mark to me as to whether I could continue with this sort of work in the same way. I did respond by insisting that that 'Pioneer Myth' paper be published in fact because it had been illegally taped, transcripts were being produced and passed around [by] people who were quite keen to see me, see my influence reduced and so forth. I look back on that time as a very difficult time, it was only six years ago so its still pretty fresh in my...

READ: Basically you were arguing that the Pioneers weren't the heroic figures...

STANNAGE: The little pamphlet itself is, I think for an Eastern States historian, and particularly one such as yourself, or Henry Reynolds, or Lyndall Ryan, or any people who have been engaged in the field would have thought it was relatively innocuous in 1985, but in the political climate here...⁸ I always tell my students that history is not written in a political or social vacuum. Although I had said that for a decade in classes, I hadn't actually sort of physically understood what that could mean until the mid eighties.

READ: So, no-one would say to you: 'you don't belong here', which is what the standard objection would have been. Did it have an affect upon you wondering if you ought to stay here, or was there any point in your identity as a Perth citizen, or a Western Australian?

STANNAGE: I felt in most ways fairly secure in terms of my place in Perth and this is partly because of football. You see football for me has not been just something that I played as a young man. But football and my professional history career have run together.

At that time, I was a director of the West Australian Football League. Now, that gives you a certain status in society. There was a constituency 'out there' which would never have believed that I was altogether bad, because of my status as a former player, indeed a State footballer, as a club selector, now a football director, indeed a director responsible for development of football in Western Australia from the little league up to national football. And there was, in a sense, a church constituency which would not believe that the Tom Stannage that they had known through the Reverend Stannage, with all it meant – talks to Church groups over the metropolitan area over many years – could be all that bad, indeed

there might be something in what he was doing. There wasn't a sort of infrastructure, a support network I could draw on because I decided very early on in all this, that I would rely on my own resources, that I would never ask anyone to stand along side me as it was putting them in a difficult position, especially not colleagues and students, which made it a bit lonely for a time, apart from wonderful family support.

In that sense I didn't feel as if I was going to be cut off from things. And indeed it worked out that way. A couple of years later I needed to walk down St Georges Terrace to raise money for a WA History Foundation and companies like Wesfarmers and Town & Country largely through football and personal contacts over the years, paid \$25,000 no strings attached until we had half a million dollars to do some good things for WA history. We give out about a dozen awards each year now... So in that sense I didn't feel... but I did feel, oh you learn all the time don't you? I mean I had written about the strength of the old ideas and the way they survive crisis after crisis. And now I could feel their power in a different way. Quite fascinating in that way.

READ: Mainly old families objected...?

STANNAGE: It was linked to the Pastoralists and Graziers Association in particular. I mean, they were under threat, pastoral leases were going to be coming up for review, it was a very tense time, and here was I saying quite a lot about the need for Aboriginal assertiveness, independence and empowerment and the stripping away of ideas that would not carry us satisfactorily into the twenty-first century and laying them all out rather more clearly. You see, people who've known about European-Aboriginal relations, like Paul Hasluck, decided many, many years ago that things known were not necessarily things that one would put in print. And you'll find even in *Black Australians* published in about 1942,⁹ based on an MA thesis a bit earlier, he actually has in his preface, lines about some of the darker side of things but we won't dwell on them because they don't carry us through satisfactorily, don't raise all this. And our generation of historians has raised them all, and the Aboriginal people have raised them above all. So Paul has always had difficulty with the newer interpretations and so forth. And he is a West Australian of course, an eminent West Australian. He and Lady Hasluck advised the State Government here in 1979 that a statue should not be erected to Yagan, because Yagan was an outlaw. And this occasioned a huge controversy here in 1978-79 and it wasn't until many years later coming up to the Bicentenary that Yagan was finally cast in bronze. So there are all those sort of things. I'd reviewed Paul Hasluck's autobiography very

savagely in the Uni journal. So, there was certainly a constituency out there that was prepared to put a black mark against me. But they couldn't quite really succeed. And even Paul Hasluck was a great football follower and we talked at the local butcher shop.

READ: But of course Yagan, if he had been alive today, might have wanted to get rid of not only those old cocky families, but might have wanted to get rid of you and me too.

STANNAGE: Oh, of course!

READ: So how does that affect your sense of belonging in Bassendean, or Perth or anywhere else?

STANNAGE: I sort of feel moderately relaxed about all that. I feel I'm on a sort of odyssey, I'm not always sure of its projection... but I think that Aboriginal people, for instance, are on their odyssey. There are points of intersection in both my life and theirs. For instance, I hadn't expected twelve months ago to be chairing a museum task force which would, in the next eight months, generate, from an all-Aboriginal working party, an 80-page report towards a co-ordinated Aboriginal heritage policy for West Australia. I don't set out to do those things. I certainly don't set out to tell anyone anything about how they should live out their lives. I certainly expect as a professional historian to be kicked around the place. I don't think you become a professional historian unless you're prepared to give and take criticism. And I certainly don't expect in that case either, that poor people of West Australia bow down and worship an historian who signaled that there was poverty in Australian history! And I certainly don't expect Aboriginal people to necessarily think I'm a good thing. And indeed, if they think that I'm part of an ancient and oppressive paternalist system which they can do without, that they needn't have friends like me, so be it. My own odyssey doesn't really need them to give me strokes.

READ: And it doesn't affect your own feeling of belongingness anywhere in particular? It's a country that's got to be shared?

STANNAGE: Actually at a quite mechanistic part of that, I believe very strongly that the current attempt at National Reconciliation, I think that – well I've been putting it with a different sort of vocabulary in the last couple of years, mainly in museum circles, about Common Agenda. It's

about survival, it's about love, it's about a whole host of things which I think we need to edge towards. I don't mean sacrificing things of great significance to us in the process. But oddly enough I think the political climate is so difficult in these areas at the moment that out of the difficulties can come a period of hope that national reconciliation may actually come about in the next few years. We are now a better informed peoples than ever before – thanks partly to the historians, thanks partly to the Aboriginal people, thanks partly to the bloody mindedness of the people who wanted to take us back to the late nineteenth century. And, yeah, I feel quite hopeful about all that. I don't feel threatened by it, I don't feel I'm going to be left behind or anything like that.

READ: So coming back to the controversy, were you forced to retract anything, or was you own trajectory...

STANNAGE: I retracted nothing.

COMMENT

The histories we write are shaped by the social, political and increasingly financial contexts of our host communities. When historians choose to run counter to the community collective memory, this tests the social ties that bind the power structures and the robustness of the historian alike. The jury may be out as to the continuing influence of the social and political forces that Tom discovered were so tenacious in the 1970s and 1980s.

Tom's analysis of the power of the ties that still bind the old families in Western Australia has shaped generations of history students. Through the 'Pioneer myth' he began to articulate the need to better understand the broader processes which serve to silence historians and their histories. For Tom, the archive was always complicated. In his later life, he began to understand that the histories of the construction of the archives was another conduit to understanding the penetration of the pioneer myth and the way that communities construct the myths and histories that they live.

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This piece has been published with the permission of Peter Read and Maria Stannage. The lightly edited extracts come from an interview by Peter Read with Tom Stannage in 1992.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Randolph Stow, 'The Singing Bones', in Howard Sergeant (ed), *New voices in the Commonwealth*, Evans Bros, London, 1968, pp37-38. Tom wrote this quote on Peter Read's kitchen wall when he and Maria visited for dinner.
- ² C.T. Stannage, *Western Australia's heritage: the pioneer myth*, University Extension monograph series, vol 1, University Extension, University of Western Australia, 1985, p1.
- ³ *ibid*, p3.
- ⁴ Letter to Tom Stannage, 26 September 1985, BARI02167, series 10, Box 4 MS 13521, State Library of Victoria.
- ⁵ The records of the Supreme Court are now held at the State Records Office of Western Australia.
- ⁶ Ronald F. Henderson, *Poverty in Australia: first main report*, April 1975, Australia Government Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1975.
- ⁷ C.T. Stannage, 'Uncovering poverty in Australian history', *Journal of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society*, vol 7, part 8, 1976, pp90-106.
- ⁸ 'Western Australia's heritage'
- ⁹ *Black Australians: A Survey of Native Policy in Western Australia, 1829-1897*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1942.