

THE HISTORY QUESTION. WHO OWNS THE PAST? By Inga Clendinnen, *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 23, 2006, 115pp, \$14.95

The well-produced *Quarterly Essay* by now hardly needs an introduction. But for the really uninitiated, *QE* is an important innovation in Australian publishing. A noted and appropriate writer is asked to put together 20,000 or so words on an important issue. Responses to the essay appear as an addendum to the next *QE* — and so it goes. The 23rd issue to some degree covers the 'History Wars', while the essayist, Inga Clendinnen, is a fine historian who has written about both the Maya and Aztec encounters with Europeans and more recently about the Aborigines' comparable experience. She has also been a Boyer Lecturer on the ABC, and was one of those invited to the Prime Minister's 'History Summit'.

There is a lot to like in Issue 23, but I finished with some a little unhappiness as well. To the good things first. You can see the so-called history wars as a contest between the black-armband crowd, who see Australian history as a story of invasion, killing and ecological destruction, and the triumphalists, who see a history of the quick growth of democratic institutions in a former jail in the context of discovery, innovation and wealth. This is gladiator stuff, with Henry Reynolds facing Keith Windschuttle over ten rounds, or as many books as they are able to bring out, with their friends doing their bits in other books, reviews and articles.

Inga Clendinnen urges us to look further. The past is in all of our heads, and the longer we have lived, the more of it there is. That past is full of 'events' and 'happenings', and they have inverted commas here because each of us can remember the events and happenings quite differently. My brothers and I remember our deceased parents in part through recounting to each other family events that sometimes one of us will have no memory of at all. The meanings Australians attach to events are also different. Waltzing Matilda and Anzac Day, Inga Clendinnen shows us brilliantly, can be understood in many different ways. So the past is there for us all, and it is the historian's task to try to provide the most accurate account of it that he or she can. History is an art and a craft, and you don't have to be an academic to undertake it.

So far, so good. Where do we go from there? The author has several targets and to a degree I found this to be a set of mini-essays whose theme was the practice of history. The first target is Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, because the novelist seemed to be claiming that she could write better history than the historians. Even so, this seems a straw victim to me. Yes, historical novelists can use their imagination in a fashion denied to historians, but their task is to keep us turning pages. The historian focuses on getting the best explanation of a singular event or process. In doing so he or she will not invent a conversation, however tempting it is to do so. Novelists will and should do so. Novelists can invent characters who live in our minds ever more; historians have to try to bring to life real characters who may not have left much evidence of what they were truly like. Different tasks, different tests.

The essayist moves to 'storytelling', about which she is insightful, though it was not clear to me why we were to go there. She wants historians to try to avoid taking part in the building of 'large inspiring narratives' — meaning, I guess, triumphalist or nation-building histories — because to do so involves narrowing one's gaze and imagination. Fine. But some historians write like that because that is what they want to write, just as others feel an urge somehow to redress the past. Inga Clendinnen doesn't, and indeed nor do I. But I can't see why she or anyone else should try to stop people doing so if that is the sort of history they want to write.

We shift now to morality in history, where the target is John Hirst, an historian whose work I enjoy partly because of his straightforward writing and partly because he looks at questions that the rest of us have (wrongly) regarded as of little interest. The essayist takes him on because he feels that apologising for what has happened in the past (the European colonisation of Australia) is futile and little more than liberal breast-beating. My own view is that while I agree with Hirst, I also recognise that one of the outcomes of the 'conquest' (or 'colonisation' — I agree that one should think about the baggage the words carry) is that I have a relatively privileged position within contemporary society and Aboriginal people on the whole do not have one. It follows (for me) that I ought to do something about the position of indigenous people, and I have tried to do so in divers ways. Clendinnen thinks that he is simply wrong, though she also agrees with him that historians shouldn't moralise. She shows us, again with great skill, how E. P. Thompson's work on the unknown toilers who made Great Britain industrially strong was infused by a strong though controlled passion. The inference I drew is that Hirst could learn a lot from Thompson. Maybe.

The last section, entitled 'The History Project', is about nationalism (her own and others'), the need for history, and especially for Australian history, in schools, and finally 'Who owns the Past?'. to which the answer is 'everyone'. I agreed with all of it, and thought it well said, too. So what vexes me? I guess my feeling at the end (and I read it twice, and some of it more often) was that the whole was not greater than the sum of the parts. The fault may be mine, but I did not feel happy with the direction of the essay or its argument. There are so many possible targets, and while I recognise that the word-limit imposes a keen problem of selection, why these targets alone? Inga Clendinnen writes well, but sometimes I wanted more argument, even at the expense of the elegant prose.

Historians provide both novelists and the general community with the broad background from which they and we construct our pictures of the past and our sense of the present, aided by books, films and TV mini-series, themselves built on that works. The work of Australian historians (and other social scientists too) over the past fifty years has been of quite extraordinary consequence in the making of contemporary Australia. I would have liked to see some recognition of that contribution in this essay. But what is there is very well worth reading.

Don Aitkin