

## ***Trentham Talk August 2018***

For this talk Di Parsons asked me to consider:

*How an historian reads this book, especially one living in Ballarat. What are the threads that catch the historian's eye? How are the characters and events affected by history?*

I think I address the first of these three issues more than the other two. After some preliminary remarks I shall discuss what I think are some of the significant features of *The Fortunes* from an historian's perspective. Then, I shall examine three general points about the relationship between the historian and the novelist.

I have brought along my copy of the trilogy. On the fly leaf is written 'R. Trembath, VI'. In other words, 'Richard Trembath, Form VI [Year Twelve], Essendon Grammar, 1972.' Our English Expression or English Literature teacher must have balked at the sheer size of the three books. We ended up doing *Crime and Punishment* instead. I finally read the Mahony trilogy after I had read *The Getting of Wisdom* which I thought was great, and before *Maurice Guest*, which deserves greater attention in my opinion.

I was a history undergraduate at the University of Melbourne in the 1970s. One of the issues we debated, especially in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century British history, was whether, and to what extent, novels could be treated as historical sources. One example here was Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Mary Barton* which is placed in Manchester during the consolidation phases of the Industrial Revolution. *Mary Barton* was considered not to be an historical source whereas Friedrich Engels' account of Manchester in the same period was treated as reportage and therefore trustworthy.

My teachers encouraged an emphasis on primary sources, deep investigation of archival sources. These tended to be written sources as oral history was still – unbelievably – in my opinion, contentious at that time. Novels could provide a bit of local colour but that was it. As an aside, over the course of many years working in academia, I found that most historians read very little fiction, no poetry and not widely outside their own field.

The Fortunes of Richard Mahony

These comments are my personal, possibly half-baked, opinions on the literary merits of an epic production. In my defence, I should say that I write fiction and poetry as well as history.

I used to consider the first volume of the trilogy the strongest literary wise. My impression is that Richardson worked to get the historical background right, especially at the outset on the Ballarat goldfield. Some of those sections, I think, reveal their origin as published sources. I would argue that the greatest value of the Fortunes trilogy, *purely in terms of historical understanding of say Ballarat at the height of the gold rush*, is the passion it might arouse amongst readers to look further into what occurred in Ballarat in that period. Perhaps, it might lead those readers to dip into a work like Clare Wright's, *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka*.

On re-reading the trilogy what strikes me forcefully now is Richardson's powerful analysis of her protagonist's mental disintegration, especially in revealing how a child makes sense of an erratic parent's descent into madness. The treatment of the mentally ill in colonial times has been handled by historians but *The Fortunes* are a much more moving account of a declining individual and his family.

*The Fortunes* have another advantage over much historical writing, especially the academic variety. A lot of academic history, Australian or otherwise, is written with a garden trowel dipped in wet cement. Many historians are incapable of writing an interesting sentence or in communicating with a wider public; others are uninterested in even attempting to do so.

Now, as promised, three general points follow about the historian/novelist relationship.

### The Great Writer Who Mixes Fact and Fiction – the non-fiction novel

In 1965 Truman Capote published what would become *In Cold Blood*, his account of the slaughter of the Clutter family in Holcombe, Kansas, by Dick Hickock and Perry Smith in 1959. He described this tour de force as a 'non-fiction novel', the original 'faction' if you like. When I first read it as an impressionable adolescent I regarded it as history. Now, it confuses me as to what its exact status is. Perhaps, it doesn't have one. No, I know what it is; it is fiction infused with some strong streams of reality, the artistic importance of ending with the dreadful hangings over-riding the fact that the author is actually making those scenes up. It is also overlaid by Capote's subsequent celebrity, multiple interpretations of the

events, several films. The lesson here? If you want the truth about what is just another set of killings by psychopaths, send a journalist into the cell, not a novelist.

### The Novelist Who Says She Is Writing History.

So, we move onto Kate Grenville whose novel, *The Secret River*, was published in 2005 to critical acclaim that few Australian writers will ever see. This is the account of convict William Thornhill and his family's arrival in Australia in 1806 and their subsequent contact with Indigenous Australians. I am not a big fan. I think much of the book is anachronistic with 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibilities intruding into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. But for today the important point is that, early on in the publicity business, Kate Grenville made some rather loose claims about how she was writing a new sort of history. Apparently, she had some special insights that meant her fictive accounts of what happened (or didn't) gave us a more reliable window into the past. She, of course, claimed later that she was misinterpreted. The historian, Inga Clendinnen, was just one who pointed out that, irrespective of the artistic merits of the book, it ain't history. Therefore, my second point. History is a social science, based ultimately on the careful triangulation of evidence. Inevitably, there is interpretation and decisions made on the balance of probability. Inevitably, there are mistakes and revisions. But invented characters in a fictional landscape are just that – fiction.

### Historians Who Bulk Out the Archive with Imaginary Conversations

My final point is not about novelists who pinch from history, but historians who pinch from fiction. I am now referring to historians who are completely thorough in their research but where the available record lets them down, fill in the space with conversations and internal monologues that are devised by the author. These may be buttressed by diary entries and letters but in the end, they are the inventions of the historian. Australian author and historian, Anna Haebich, describes this process as 'factually informed but imaginatively conceived'. I am going to be hard-line here. If you cross that line from the known to the imaginative, it may be art, but it isn't necessarily history.

An example here is the work of Sydney based historian, Kiera Lindsey, a friend and former colleague. She is currently writing the biography of 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Australian artist, Adelaide Ironside. Here, Kiera's detailed archival research is complemented with imaginary

internal monologues, one instance being what is passing through Adelaide's head on a ferry across a river. But what might have happened (and probably didn't) is no substitute for what we know happened.

And that last sentence might serve as a good one-line description of my overall argument.

Richard Trembath