

The Curriculum Tales: Teaching History at Sydney in the Second Half of the Century

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When I enrolled as a first year undergraduate in History at the University of Sydney in 1964 the Department's curriculum was underpinned by the notion of the centrality (and superiority) of European civilisation. First year students could choose between two courses in Early Modern European history, one with an emphasis on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the other focussing on the period from 1600 to 1750. In both courses, about a third of the content related specifically to England. No courses in Late Modern European history were available at first year level because it was considered that students who had just studied this period in the Leaving Certificate history syllabus needed to be exposed to something totally new. At second year level, students were able to study nineteenth- and twentieth-century European history although here there was a deliberate emphasis on subjects like the French Revolution which were not part of the high school curriculum. In third year, students studied subjects that related to European expansion. United States, Australian and Asian (particularly Indian) history were taught as sites of the spread of European, and especially English, civilisation. And so Indian history was taught not so much from the perspective of the indigenous inhabitants but in terms of imperial dynamics. The Australian course was famous for focussing on the English background to the extent that the First Fleet usually didn't sail until at least half-way through the year. In those rare years when the syllabus miraculously and accidentally extended as far as or beyond the Rum Rebellion, such an achievement was hailed as a

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triumph of modern history. So too, much of the emphasis of the American syllabus was on the colonial period, the era of British rule. It was a measure of the perspective from which the course was taught that John Manning Ward's lecture on the causes of the American Revolution argued for the fact that the British policy that aroused American antagonism was constitutionally legal, while the American responses, including the Declaration of Independence, had no basis in law.¹

From the perspective of the very late nineties such a syllabus seems ethnocentric and anachronistic. But it was a syllabus for its times and, read as a text in its context, it reminds us that Australian academics, many of them Oxbridge educated, still saw Europe, and especially England, as the continuing source of 'Australian' culture. These after all were times when scholars at Sydney wore academic gowns to lectures, addressed each other by their surnames, and knew how to pronounce the names of Oxford colleges. Moreover, some of the courses were stunningly conceived, brilliantly taught. The first year course which covered the Renaissance and Reformation was generally referred to as 'Theology I', but those who lectured in it, Bruce Mansfield and Ken Cable, were spellbinders. After Mansfield's lecture on Calvin and the doctrine of predestination one young woman, forgetting she was a professed atheist, began to debate the point of her life if she were not among the 'saved'.

The Department I returned to in 1973, as a (still) young and very inexperienced lecturer was already beginning to feel the forces of change. In American history, the syllabus devised by Neville Meaney focussed on the emergence of the United States as a unique and separate civilisation, rather than as a colonial appendage. A new generation of Australian historians, led by Brian Fletcher and Heather Radi, developed courses that included the late nineteenth as well as the twentieth century. In Asian history Marjorie Jacobs used her professorial status to ensure the development of curriculums that allowed the teaching of Asian history on its own terms. Some Sydney graduates, although earning their postgraduate degrees at Oxbridge, did not share the same level of admiration for England, its culture and its institutions

that John Manning Ward and his colleagues had felt. When he returned from Cambridge, Richard Bosworth attacked 'Anglophilia' wherever he found it. Soon, colleagues were addressing each other by their first names. More importantly, English history lost its centrality as the focus of the Modern European curriculum shifted east towards Spain (and its colonies), France, Germany, Italy, Russia. Finally, during the early seventies academic staff numbers in the Department increased at an impressive rate. Those arriving included Americans and Canadians as well as returning Australians who had deliberately chosen to undertake post-graduate study in North America, rather than follow the well-beaten path to London, Oxford or Cambridge. Not only were they less sympathetic to 'English ways' than many of their older colleagues, but in North America they had imbibed new types and approaches to history, and new subject areas as well. In American universities in this period the 'new social history' was enormously influential, while traditional political and diplomatic history, in particular, were dismissed as anachronistic. This new history emphasised the lives and cultures of ordinary people, and argued that their stories were both recoverable and important. Many of those taking positions at Sydney in the mid-seventies, myself included, were anxious to introduce courses that taught history from the 'bottom up'.

But in an era before the existence of departmental undergraduate committees, when professors still largely determined which staff taught which course, change was not easy to achieve. The intellectual rationale underpinning the syllabus at Sydney was gone but the curriculum itself lingered aimlessly on. Tinkering took place, with the addition of Late Modern European and Asian history to first year, and the introduction of Australian, Asian and United States history to second year. As a consequence, the course structure began to resemble a great Gothic edifice, organic rather than structured. Finally, in the late seventies, largely because of Marjorie Jacobs's recognition that something had to be done, the existing syllabus was completely jettisoned and something quite radical replaced it.

Reflecting the changes in personnel in the Department, the new syllabus drew on American university precedents. Instead of students taking three courses, one each year, to major in History, now each course was made up of a series of units. This was, and is, a common practice in America, with its semester system, and a course structure consisting of a myriad of offerings, some counting more points towards a degree than others. The aims of those who sponsored the new Sydney syllabus were admirable—to provide coherence, choice, progression (by defining the requirements of second year courses as harder than first year and so on)—but there were inherent problems in seeking to impose an American history curriculum onto an Australian (or I suppose originally Scottish) degree structure. The curriculum belonged in a semester system, but Sydney still operated on a three term year; the degree here was based on the completion of nine subjects, but the structure adopted by History included a variety of units constituting a subject. As someone who has since made the history of the impact of American culture on Australia one of his fields of research I can now see, with the benefit of hindsight, that this attempt simply to impose an American curriculum on an Australian university structure to which it was not suited was never likely to succeed. We like to reconstitute American cultural imports on our own terms, not to adopt them wholesale.²

The system was American, the response typically Australian. Those colleagues who didn't like it paid lip service to the new curriculum but taught their courses as if it didn't exist. This created some problems because what were supposed to be units of a course were taught as if they were full courses, and so the workload on students increased alarmingly. Those who understood that it didn't work, but still supported the principles that underpinned it, sought to tinker with the syllabus. Originally, third year students 'progressed' by taking seminar units; but these were quickly abandoned on the grounds that they were too labour intensive (and perhaps too demanding for 'pass' students), and that in any case most students didn't benefit from them. This meant that second and third year students now enrolled in a common pool of courses: the notion of

progression was in one sense lost. In fact, from the early eighties until about 1990 the battle over the syllabus became like a gigantic lost and found game. New elements would be introduced, only to be discarded a year or so later as opponents voted them out at Departmental meetings. Then supporters would all turn up at the next meeting to vote them in again.

Professor Deryck Schreuder had some clear ideas about the form the syllabus should take. Better than most, he knew that the era of narrow specialisation was over, that history needed to be taught in broad ranging contexts, as a comparative subject and in interdisciplinary terms, if it were to survive competition from such new areas as Cultural and Media Studies. Although he was not involved in the meetings that led to the establishment of the syllabus that was introduced in 1989–90, it was his vision that inspired those who lobbied for change, drafted a comprehensive curriculum, and organised its formal adoption.³ The Committee that brought about change, the Curriculum Committee, was certainly not an oligarchy. Indeed its chair and members ‘ran’ for office on an announced and specified platform of curriculum reform. Given that it was, and is, the usual practice to have to force colleagues into committee responsibilities, this was a rare moment in the history of the Department’s political culture. This new syllabus left first year untouched; but at the senior level it provided for the introduction of both Specialist (which cover a limited chronology and are usually limited to one country) and Thematic (which address a prescribed theme or problem, and cover a wide field both geographically and chronologically) units. In requiring upper level students to undertake both types of units, the syllabus introduced them to both broad ranging and particular topics. The new syllabus also required a common method, or approaches to history, unit for all second year honours students. This did not, nor does it, seek to impose a particular approach to history, but rather to expose students to a wide variety of philosophies and methods used to write history. These include everything from Marxism to Modernism, from Positivism to Post-Structuralism.

Some colleagues opposed the new History II Honours

programme on the grounds that they didn't want students exposed to approaches, specifically Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, which are potentially subversive of the very discipline of history. In the debates surrounding the programme's introduction I remember one colleague calling for the Department to return to traditional approaches, leaving 'postmodernism' to other departments. 'That's fine,' another responded, 'if we're content to become an anachronism, an exhibition in the Museum of Dead University Departments.' Those who devised this course, and those who have taught and supported it since, have argued for the necessity of exposing students to as wide a variety of approaches as possible, allowing them to choose those which they find most useful and defensible. Indeed, there is an important principle at stake here. There is a long tradition at Sydney which emphasises eclecticism: we have never sought to create a 'school' which identifies us as adopting a particular approach. Some of us are Marxists, others Postmodernists. Many of us are magpies, influenced by a range of approaches and 'philosophies', including Ethnography, Structuralism, Poststructuralism, the New Labor history, and Feminist history. As teachers, we interpret our role to share our understandings of what these approaches mean, of how they can be used. Although undergoing minor adjustments, the syllabus adopted more than a decade ago is still functioning effectively and enjoys the support of almost all members of the Department.

There has been another shift as well. Until the late eighties most courses taught in the History Department were courses in political, economic, diplomatic and social history, or sometimes a combination of these. But since then the influence of cultural history has become pervasive. Essentially this emphasis in the courses we teach reflects changes in historiography, for much of what is now written can be classified as cultural history. And so, amongst the most popular courses in the Department are those with such titles as 'Film and History', and 'The African-American Experience'. At the same time, courses in new subject areas have developed. In the seventies women's history was viewed by many of the male historians in the Department as a discipline to

be treated with suspicion and distrust. Some claimed it was ideologically 'loaded', others labelled it as downright subversive. Now women's history is at the heart of the History syllabus. There are courses that deal specifically with the historical roles of women, but every course in the Department includes topics that investigate the contribution of women, an inclusion that has resulted not from imposition but rather from a recognition that in most past societies women have constituted at least 50% of the population. How can we claim to have taught the past in its entirety unless we reflect on the roles and contributions of women, the nature of the transcultural relations between women and men? We have all benefited not only from the new social and the new cultural history (both of which emphasise the need to recover the past lives of those previously ignored) but also from second wave feminism which in turn has changed the nature of social and cultural history.

When attempts were made in about 1980 to introduce courses in popular culture into the curriculum they were greeted with scorn, with arguments that these were inappropriate in a university history syllabus. But courses in popular culture are now also commonplace. Amongst the fourth year honours seminars a course entitled 'Writing the History of Popular Culture' draws by far the largest number of students. It is an indication of the fact that some of the brightest students are drawn towards cultural history, and especially the history of popular culture, that the majority of research subjects chosen by commencing PhD students over the last few years are in cultural history and they include such topics as science fiction films, modernist dance, representations of masculinity in Australian cinema, and the history of jazz.

A further change has involved a greater emphasis on Australian history. Most of the appointments made in the Department in the eighties were in this field. This was not so much the result of a conscious decision to promote Australian history at all costs as a response to student demand not only for more units of study at the undergraduate level but for more supervision by qualified staff at the postgraduate level. In this context it is worth noting that during the last ten years up to three-quarters of the postgraduate

research degrees completed in the department have been in Australian history. And I think it is important to understand this 'demand' in a wider context. The period since 1945 has witnessed a remarkable flowering of 'the Arts' (to use a wonderfully anachronistic 1950s phrase) in Australia. In this era we have witnessed the establishment of national opera and ballet companies, the entrenchment of repertory theatre troupes, the enlargement on an extraordinary scale of the corpus of Australian film, literature and art. As part of this process the interest in Australian history has deepened, which in turn has led to a dramatic increase in the quantity and quality of writing about Australian history. Australians now have an interest and concern about their own history and heritage that was simply not evident thirty years ago. And it is surely the responsibility of the Sydney University History Department both to nurture and to encourage that interest in the same way that the National Museum of Australia, due to open in 2001, will also seek to raise the consciousness of Australians and visitors about our heritage and history. I think it is also important to add that Australian history is not taught from a 'nationalist' perspective at Sydney. Rather the courses we offer emphasise that Australia was a settler society and needs to be compared with similar sets of colonies in North America and southern Africa. Our syllabuses emphasise what became unique in Australia—values, institutions, culture—but they also stress the experiences which Australian women, immigrants, working people and immigrants shared with their counterparts in other New World societies.

In the nineties there are more historians of Australia in the department than in any other field. But that is the result not of a nationalist push but rather of an historical accident. All of our present Australianists were hired in the eighties and are still relatively young. Over the last decade many colleagues in other areas who were hired in the sixties and seventies have retired, not to be replaced, thanks to funding cuts courtesy of the Federal Government. So the number of academics teaching European, United States and Asian history has shrunk dramatically, and

simply by retaining its staff numbers the Australian 'area' has become the largest.

In the fifties and sixties academic staff in History did not necessarily enjoy the 'luxury' of teaching their research interests. Rather, they simply organised and taught courses in those fields which the professor(s) deemed appropriate. Ken Cable's chosen research field was Australian history, but he found himself preparing lectures in Early Modern European as well as Japanese history. At the same time, before the late seventies there was little encouragement or pressure to engage in research; it was something you did in the privacy of your own home. And it was not to be talked of in public. Some of the senior staff, including John Manning Ward, published extensively but they did not believe that they had a responsibility to provide research mentoring. In this climate there were many staff who taught across an impressive area of history but published very little, if at all. Now, the situation is quite different. Everyone is encouraged, indeed expected, to research and publish. The output of books and articles published by members of the Department has increased impressively and many of them enjoy international reputations in their fields. Moreover, the younger academics don't need to be acculturated into a 'research or don't get on' environment. As postgraduate students they have already learnt the importance of publication, and most have already established reputations as published scholars in their fields by the time they join the staff here. What has developed is a close relationship between what historians at Sydney teach, and what they research. But this has not happened in a narrow sense. Shane White has written extensively about the culture of African-Americans in early nineteenth-century New York: he has utilised this to develop a broad ranging course 'The African-American Experience'. Penny Russell has researched the lives of upper class women in nineteenth-century Melbourne: from this has emerged an important course on Australian Women's history. Roy Macleod has produced an astonishing number of articles on the history of Australian Science: for undergraduates the bonus is a highly original course on 'Australia in the Nuclear Age'. John Ward, John Pryor

and Lyn Olson have contributed important and influential studies that have altered our understanding of the maritime history and cultural life of Medieval Europe. Out of the knowledge accumulated through their research they have constructed a curriculum in Medieval European history which is unmatched in Australia and is now being imitated both by North American and European universities. This close bonding of research and teaching has had two important results. First, it has allowed the teachers to use their extensive knowledge of the subject to go deeper into the subject, to explore and expose it in ways that an academic who had not researched (but rather just prepared) the subject could not do. Second, because of the determination of Sydney historians to develop new approaches and perspectives, much of the research that is undertaken in the department crosses both national and interdisciplinary boundaries, making it unique. No other Australian history department approaches its subjects quite in this way—at least, not consistently. And because our approach to research is different so is our curriculum. There is no Sydney School of history but perhaps there is a Sydney approach to history.

Where to? There are grounds for optimism. For the first time in years, new scholars are being hired to replace some of the colleagues who have retired. If we choose carefully we will bring in a new generation of historians dedicated to both research and teaching, historians who will maintain the tradition of a wide perspective, a world view. These new scholars, too, will contribute to our reputation as a department on the rise, acknowledged internationally for the quality of its personnel. It is also likely that the History Department will become part of a School that may also include Archaeology, Ancient History, Classics, Gender Studies, Museum Studies and Philosophy. Within this larger conglomeration we will need to be careful to maintain our administrative independence as a department and our academic independence as a discipline. But the School also opens some exciting prospects for interdepartmental appointments and interdisciplinary courses. I hope that in co-operation with Historical Archaeology and Museum Studies we will be able to introduce an undergraduate programme

in Heritage Studies; and that in consultation with Gender Studies we will be able to develop units of study in the new 'discipline' of Cultural Studies.

The History Department is certainly very different from what it was when I joined it over a quarter of a century ago. It is no longer administered by benevolent professors; rather, decisions are determined through a committee system, and the Head of Department ignores the views of colleagues at her or his peril. We no longer measure our academic standards by the yardstick of Oxbridge, because, like Australians generally, historians at Sydney have abandoned the colonial cringe. In the past, some individual members of the Department, perhaps most notably Patrick Collinson and Ernest Bramsted, enjoyed prestigious international reputations. Our aim is to continue to nurture individual brilliance but also to turn the Department as a whole into one that can be classified as world class, renowned for the quality of its teaching and research, a quality comparable not only to the best of British but of Asian and North American counterparts.

Notes

- 1 Given that Jefferson invoked universal principles in the introduction to the Declaration he probably would have agreed with such an interpretation. But no doubt he would also have argued that the fact that English law sanctified such 'authoritarian' measures justified separation.
- 2 For the official account of these changes see B. Caine, *et al.*, *History of Sydney, 1891–1991: Centenary Reflections*, Canberra, 1992, pp.90–98.
- 3 I confess to chairing the Committee that initiated these changes.