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“Contested National Memory and Historical Consciousness in Australia”

Key words

public memories, ‘History Wars’, oral historiography

Australian history has been dominated by explosive and heated debate in recent years. Like the ongoing debates over Japan’s contested national memory, these so-called ‘History Wars’ have been fought over how Australians remember and commemorate their national past in history syllabuses, museum exhibits, and national commemorations, as well as the legal recognition of Indigenous histories through land rights and reparations. Fought over contested sites of the ‘national story’, this ongoing, anxious historical dispute forcefully demonstrates the contested politics of public memory.

For example, should the British colonisation of Australia be taught as ‘settlement’ or ‘invasion’? What has been the influence of multiculturalism in shaping modern Australian history? And why don’t young Australians know the name of their first Prime Minister? Such heated disputes have played out as highly partisan and polarised without any real challenge or question.

While the history wars continue to stimulate argument and analysis in scholarly articles, opinion pieces and public commentary, little is known of their impact on ordinary people. What do Australians think about the history wars? Politicians, public commentators and academics have weighed in, each advancing partisan lines of argument while claiming to speak on behalf of so-called ‘ordinary Australians’, yet Australians themselves have been notably absent from these public discussions over the past. And the question remains, how do they respond to this public contest over the national story? What do ordinary people think of their history in light of these politicised historical debates?

By way of answer, this paper examines the everyday conversations about Australian history around the country as a response to the history wars. It goes into household kitchens, neighbourhood tea-rooms and community centres around Australia to ask what do people think of their nation’s past? How do they connect to Australian history? Furthermore, by proposing a method of ‘oral historiography’ to examine the impact of these public debates, it brings a critical new perspective to historical consciousness in Australia today.

Drawing on a series of interviews from communities around Australia, my research reveals that members of the public do not talk about Australian history in such polarised terms—and a number of them even cynically questioned the media’s role in advancing this dispute. This paper asks why: why such simplistic public debate while so-called ‘ordinary’ people around the country

understand their nation's history and the role of history education as inherently complex and subjective? This paper challenges the ways these public debates over the past are sustained in the media and in politics. In doing so, it discusses the possibility for historians, public commentators and educationists to engage in these historical debates without reproducing their dominant discourse of division.

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Anna Clark is a Chancellor's Postdoctoral Fellow in public history at the University of Technology, Sydney and graduated with a PhD in history at the University of Melbourne in 2005. Her most recent publications include a chapter on the 'History Wars' in *Australian History Now* (which she co-edited with Paul Ashton: New South Press, 2013), 'Ordinary People's History' in *History Australia* (April 2012), and 'Talking about History: A Case for Oral Historiography' in *Public History Review* (2010). Anna's current project uses interviews with 100 Australians from around the country about their thoughts on history and national identity.