

# HISTORIANS AS TROUBLE-MAKERS

## Cultural Heritage, Tourism and the Public Historian in Tasmania

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## The Historian as Trouble-Maker

When working in 1992 for the department of Parks, Wildlife and Heritage, an anxious phone-call from the Cultural Tourism attaché within the Tasmanian Department of Tourism was received. Of concern was a request from a senior lecturer in History at the University of Tasmania who wanted signs displayed for Smith O'Brien's cottage on Maria Island. My caller wanted to know whether the lecturer was a "Trouble-maker"! This month there is a national conference in Melbourne on "Cultural Tourism"; there are no historians listed to speak, but the Department of Tourism's representatives are listed. Similarly, Richard Flanagan's texts used in the new Strahan Visitor Centre resulted in his work being queried at State Cabinet level; critical comments by one of his supervising panel were only withdrawn after threatened libel action.

These and similar incidents which have occurred to colleagues were a replica of my experiences at Port Arthur Historic Site, and as a freelance historian before and since. While at Port Arthur I was threatened directly and indirectly when asserting points of view, particularly those concerning the new site museum. All these experiences indicate that historians as a profession are not setting the agenda in the public perception and management of history. When we do become involved with history in the market place, our profound concerns and perceptions are regarded as "trouble-making." Our view of ourselves and our role differs greatly from those who ask us for historical data, or who are employing us. As a result they are interpreting the past for the community, for the visitor, albeit unwittingly, with little or no input from historians.

We are not in charge of the public process of history which instead is being dictated to us by other professions, particularly archaeologists and planners, who see us as information providers. We are not seen as interpreters and transmitters of cultural knowledge and values. The small regard that the State has for historians is shown by there being no position or category within the government for our profession. During eight years with Parks, Wildlife and Heritage, I was classified under the clerical division as an "Administrative Officer." All contract historians are similarly categorised. A recent advertisement for a historian required only a driver's licence, all that the Department is legally bound to ask.

Although not yet in control, as Public Historians we are contributing to the broadening of historical knowledge, widening the professional and popular perception of history and forcing a re-evaluation of the use of history. This is particularly true at local government level, and is offering a challenge to current narrow perceptions of history both in the community and at the university.

A multi-million dollar “Heritage Industry” operates within Tasmania which public historians have just begun to recognise. This includes the Heritage Professions- archaeology, history, planning, landscape, conservation, curation and archives- the Family History, and the so called Cultural Tourism.

In the first group, historians are rarely seen as part of the on-going team. Most of these professions regard historians as “data providers” - maps, photos, structural documentation etc. While these are some of the areas where historians excel ( and which can save thousands of dollars), in the end, other Heritage Professions tend to have a different motivation, the historian will see the structure/conservation and its interpretation as inseparable. This springs from the historians’ ability to see the whole picture, a skill is not appreciated or utilised. The recent example of a historian working as a team-member on the Strahan Visitor Centre along with an architect and designer met opposition from archaeologists within P. W. & H. who wanted to impose their view of history on the project.

Some historians, as Kay Daniels has realised, need to become cultural managers to ensure the historical voice is heard.

Historians are at present only involved in the first area, where we usually are unable to carry the implications of our research to a conclusion, as interpretation of the site -the signs and brochures etc - are produced by other staff in the employing body, often without discussion and with questionable plagiarism. Time constraints, and a lack of appreciation, often prevent us putting the work in perspective. We are managed rather than managers of our history.

Because the industry is unrecognised, and for other peculiarly Tasmanian reasons, the Public Historian is working in a number of areas not recognised by the general community or the University of Tasmania. Due to this, those Public Historians working in the state established the Professional Historians Association of Tasmania (P. H. A. T.) two years ago to act as watch-dog and support. A similar body is working in each state and there are moves to establish an Australia-wide body.

Outside the university there are three main areas where historians are or could be active.

- i) Conservation /Management Plans,
- ii) Tourism, and
- ii) Genealogy.

All three compete with the social concern, human interest, coupled with the training and rigour of intellectual objectivity that led us to history in the first place. The historical process is perhaps at odds with the public arena- this needs to be explored.

Most work for management plans comes via sponsored National Estate grants; this requires the support of a local council or Museum. For example, the Hop-Industry project is

sponsored by the Queen Victoria Museum and National Parks and Wildlife. Both require a degree of subservience, and an acceptance of the guide-lines invented by senior planners in the Australian Heritage Commission, the majority of whom are archaeologists. These are aimed at conservation of structures rather than allowing the local professionals to select priorities. Social history is seen as a tool to preserve and record buildings. The complete lack of heritage legislation in Tasmania exacerbates the selectivity and rigid criteria.

With its grass-roots approach, genealogy has provided a boost to the interest in history, with a growing number of branches and members. Yet few "serious Historians" make use of the wealth of information collected, nor appreciate the research skills which family historians acquire. No courses are available at tertiary level to tap into and extend these skills.

For historians to be accepted in the wider area, particularly tourism, is not easy. Historians are dealing with older perception of "History". To many, with unpleasant school experiences, history is irrelevant; to others it is still the record of VIP's. To many in the Tourism Industry, history is still "Product" to sell, or at best "Ripping Yarns" to label "Product" with. This is particularly true of popular culture which is completely outside our influence where the majority of authors are not trained historians but often spouses of stockbrokers providing genteel window-dressing for the tourist industry. Not that there aren't plenty of "Ripping Yarns", its just that the same ones get re-hashed in varying degrees of accuracy, and the wrong conclusions - or no conclusions - being drawn from them.

The Tourist Industry sees history from a different perspective. The dollar signs rolled over the eyes of tourism officials when they read the first pamphlet we produced at Port Arthur on American political prisoners in Tasmania; - "The American Market!!"

Port Arthur Historic Site, as one academic friend observed, was very much the "coal-face;" of History. With over 160,000 visitors annually, Port Arthur is the most visited site in Tasmania, even beating the Casino. Port Arthur has now been a tourist Mecca longer then it was a prison; for over a 100 years the visitors perceptions of the past have been shaped by the popular culture provided by that unique site; the buildings and ruins, the artefacts and the guides who give the human link with the past.

While there, I tried to grapple with all three aspects of Public History, but keeping in mind a strong sense of academic objectivity and commitment to professional standards, valuing the place finally as a "Sacred Site."

The two management phases at Port Arthur which I experienced between 1983 and 1992 exposed different approaches to history, neither in the end satisfactory to the historian. Some new approaches need to be devised for the historians role in this arena. In the first phase the site was run jointly by National Parks and Wildlife Service, who provided site

rangers and guides, and the Port Arthur Conservation Project, where the direction for the 11 professional staff was dominated by archaeology. Tourists were seen by NPWS as interfering with the working lives of rangers, and by the PACP as an intrusion into an extended series of archaeological digs. The presentation of history was then the responsibility of N. P. W. S. whose guides, mainly rangers or their relatives, generally loathed the job. (Locals derisively called the department, the “National Perks and Quiet-life”!). NPWS actively resisted involvement of “experts” from the PACP.

The PACP was not concerned with the public perception of history in a broad sense, and planning for the conservation of buildings did not consider the intellectual or cultural impression the visitor might leave with. Port Arthur is now a mish-mash of interpretive signs from three eras, N. P. W. S. , P. A. C. P. and the current P. A. M. A. .

The site historian’s role was to provide documentation for conserving building fabric. The site and visiting historians were expected to “interpret” Port Arthur’s history using photocopied extracts of documents, rather than visit the State Archives in Hobart. Signs and the conserved buildings became, as Kay Daniels and Richard Flanagan have observed, a monument to the skill of archaeologists, rather than to the lives of the occupants.

Despite these failings, as an inter-disciplinary team all members acquired an appreciation of the skills of other areas in a way that has not been emulated, and which -despite the many failings of the PACP- stands as a model for future heritage studies. Most staff saw the need to relate to the local community. A greater failing was the lack of involvement of any department of the University of Tasmania- including History- in the \$9 Million project.

The opportunity to direct the Interpretation Program and tackle the popular perception of the visitor came with the new site administration in 1987 under the Port Arthur Management Authority. Set up under an Act of Parliament, the site was managed by a Board appointed by the Minister. But the idealism of ex PACP staff who joined the PAMA was sadly out of kilter with the pragmatism of the economic rationalists who moved in.

While the PACP had no commercial interests involved in site management, conversely, no heritage specialists were appointed to the new Board established to oversee the site, only businessmen, (and a representative from the departments of Tourism and P. W. & H.). Their input saw the rapid rise of Ghost Tours, as local businesses strongly supported them through the Board, as they kept visitors overnight on the Peninsula. Un-documented, the more inventive guides added to the myths of Port Arthur.

Without being asked, my title was changed from Historian to Interpretation Officer. In the first 12 months the Interpretation Section introduced a Guide Training Programme, based on an outline drawn up under the PACP, and devised a variety of tours to meet the needs of various visitor groups. Guide training gave both background information to staff on site details (some of this also gleaned during the PACP years), and the wider context of the

site's history and significance as a penal and military out-post. Staff met visiting lecturers who spoke on current research; Ian Duffield, (Black Convicts), and Tom Dunning, (American Political Prisoners), Dr G. Wilson (19th C Anaesthetics and Medicine ).

Attempting to certificate the guide training program ran into major hurdles, as no educational body - TAFE, Drysdale House, or Tas Uni- offered comparable courses. As a result, the skills of the guides are unrewarded and most earn less than the lawn-mower drivers and need to work week-ends so penalty rates offer a reasonable standard of living.

Historians don't expect to operate as managers or PR officers , but should be. These became the main focus of the role of Interpretation Officer at Port Arthur. Organising rosters, mega tours for cruise ships, such as the "Bella Russia", hosting and informing TV crews for popular personalities such as Taylor's Australia, Danny Clark and Olivia Newton-John, plus visiting TV crew from Britain, Germany and Japan left no time for research. Travel writers from all over the world saw articles in the London Guardian, USA Today, Toronto Star, the Age and Australian, while the local paper always cast stories into "Community News!". Vogue magazine used the site as a setting for a winter promotion, but the photographer did his best to minimise the setting, somehow not conducive to the products!

Ethical questions quickly arose about the use and abuse of the site. By implication, what should be done over unfair and unethical proposals became a matter of conflict. Guides were initially expected to have no tea breaks or lunch relief, nor was there a staff tea room. These and a number of other issues were only rectified with industrial action after stand-over tactics from the Management.

The use of the site for promotion - no matter what- in return for publicity also resulted in a conflict with the site Management. The market exposure to be gained via Japanese TV crews for "Clive James"-style panel games was considered a scoop. A T-shirt presented to me was for a quiz show, "How Much for the Whole World" where the panel back in Japan had to guess the value of certain objects. Another TV crew wanted to use Port Arthur as material for a "Punishment Tour" of the site, where the panel had to guess which punishments occurred at Port Arthur. On another occasion, the Church was used as the venue for a photo-shoot by a hot-rod bike magazine, where a naked model was astride a gleaming bike within the old ruin.

Despite attempts to establish a History Room, the Summer School concept, tours and talks to Elderhostel groups, and encouraging relatives to donate material to the site, (with limited success,) the Management saw no advantage in these proposals. Instead, a fictitious Convict Data-base was advertised nationally as being available on site which answered all genealogical research needs. The State Archivist then wanted to know where this Data-base had been acquired as he had all known convict records!

The buildings and ruins have become mere backdrops to selling an aesthetic location. Sherry party receptions were held in the Model Prison. A new range of Mercedes were filmed on site. The book-shop sold souvenirs. Meanwhile the Education programme was cut and no teacher is on site. The new Museum display was erected in haste, with many errors and a lack of consultation.

Once more there was a clash of expectations about the purpose of history. While historians see their subject as on-going, businessmen regard history as finite (the PACP had “done” Port Arthur), and there was no need of research, unless to decorate signs with a few bare facts. This coincides with the view that “anyone can be a historian” ; so can anyone be a botanist or mechanic-if they work hard and long enough.

As a result of Management direction, I found myself sitting with a stop-watch on a trailer drawn by a tractor, time-trialing the length need to circle the site with a view to introduce a “tractor train” to deliver people around the site. The inappropriateness of this was not felt by the Board, anymore than the previously proposed “Sound and Light Show”, where a sealed road around the site was to run a bus, linked electronically to mechanical characters designed to appear under spot-light at key localities. The finale of this drive was to end on Scorpion Rock look-out behind the Church where a laser light show from the Isle Of the Dead would be the “piece de resistance.”

Little interest was shown by the Management in the site’s interpretation. None of the Board joined any guided tours, nor was the Management Plan or the concepts of the Burra Charter discussed in 5 years. This was despite the broadened knowledge of many visitors regarding Australian history post 1988; (and for American visitors, post Robert Hughes.), nor the rise in family history’s popularity.

Many visitors on the other hand, fully appreciated the skill and knowledge of staff. They were complimented on the care of the grounds, the restoration of the buildings. Some were moved to tears, others clapped the guides for their eloquence. Others wanted to debate issues involving the nation’s history.

The reason for the failure to develop a mature attitude and a fully fledged cultural insight is due to a number of factors, some already canvassed. Too plainly, the “Convict Stain”, is still with us; we haven’t a strong enough sense of self to assert an identity. This is reflected in the large number of poor quality histories produced in Tasmania during 1988, the lack of a Heritage Legislation (the last state to ), the poor placing of Tasmanian History in school syllabuses, the lack of history components in the Drysdale House Hospitality courses, and the lack of liaison between the University and relevant state departments.

Likewise there is a lack of professional interaction between the Public Historians and the academic colleagues within the University. Historians are the only “Heritage” profession which does not have a direct link between those former graduates working in the

community and their academic training ground. As a result, we are being out-flanked, and out-employed- by other profession, particularly the archaeologist and planner. This even more regrettable as teaching and academia- the two former key employers of history graduates - are no longer accessible. Access to grants and the Australian Heritage Commission are not developed either. (This conference is a good start.)

While Tasmania has not introduced Public History or Archaeology as a course/career, other universities are refining existing courses to cater for “ Historical Archaeology.” With no Tasmanian school of archaeology, other states regard Tasmania as fair game. LaTrobe University uses the state as an untapped resource. (Perhaps the ghost of Dr Crowther haunts us?)

Due to the lack of Public Historians here, interstate consultants are being employed on Tasmanian projects by the Departments of Construction and P. W. & H.

Mainland universities have begun to remedy this by offering course in Public History. Monash and the University of NSW offer Public History courses. A Tasmanian graduate has recently returned with the Monash post-graduate qualification and is now working in Hobart. Any history in Tasmania needs to include its contemporary perceptions .which the rest of the community is having to grapple with, and not be lost in a time warp.

The four strands in the Regional History course being offered at the Bendigo campus of LaTrobe University could be a useful model in covering the areas where there is such potential for employment and understanding.

1. Community History
2. Australian Studies
3. Heritage Conservation
4. Cultural Tourism

Due to all of the above factors, History is a very junior played in the cultural heritage movement in Tasmania. This is despite the largely unnoticed Heritage Industry which deserves to assessed for its impact as an asset to the state. Even a rough calculation shows that the annual salary for heritage staff -Curators, conservators, archivists and historians- working in the two Tasmanian museums, State Archives, and freelance totals over a million dollars. Yet ALL of these are trained on the Mainland in the professional sense; there is a urgent need for schools in these skills to be established in Tasmania both to provide employment and provide an infra-structure. The above figure does not include the boost to the state's economy from genealogical tourism, nor the value of the other professions involved in building conservation. Because of these implications, the Professional Historian's Association of Australia (Tasmania) is urging a study of the value to the state of the Heritage Industry.



At the opening ceremony for Mt Field National Park in 1917, key speakers talked of the new Park's importance to tourism; William Crooke, the founder of the Park placed the priorities differently. The Park he argued, was there for the people and children of Tasmania. Without Heritage education facilities, most of the training and drive for cultural heritage management is coming from outside the island, as consultants move from interstate, already over-supplied with heritage specialists. In the end, we must decide who is to be interpret and manage our inheritance; at present Tasmanians and Tasmanian trained historians are struggling to control theirs. If we do not acquire these management skills and status, (and develop heritage legislation with a social history base), we will become mere relics in an island of monuments and tourist signs.

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