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### **Writing *Australians All: A History of Growing Up from the Ice Age to the Apology***

One morning a couple of weeks ago I was deep in the middle of writing something when I was surprised by a phone call from a radio journalist who wanted to interview me about my latest book, *Australians All: A History of Growing Up from the Ice Age to the Apology*. After rapidly telling me his name (so rapidly, indeed, that I didn't quite hear it), he bowled the first question at me. It went something like this:

'So, Nadia, is it true that you wrote *Australians All* because you are sick to death of the way Australian history is being taught in our schools?'

Gulp! Feeling somewhat like the man who was asked if he had stopped beating his wife, I floundered into a passionate declaration of my support and admiration for history teachers, history students, Australian history, Australian schools, and probably a few other things as well.

'So!' the next question hurtled down the phone line, 'Why *did* you write it?'

Usually, before I do an interview, I make a little list of dot points. This time, I was caught short. Why *did* I write *Australians All*?

Why *did* I spend nine years of my life, supporting myself without any research grants or paid employment, writing a history book that would be marketed to young Australians in the second decade of the twenty-first century — a time when kids are supposedly not interested in either (a) history or (b) books?

Some twenty minutes later, when the interview came to an end, I was really pleased that I had been forced to come up with my answer spontaneously. From what I can remember, it began something like this:

#### **Every historian's dream**

Surely it is every historian's dream to write a comprehensive history of her own country, as long as she is given the freedom to do this in accordance with her own interpretation of that history.

Before I signed the contract for this book, I had — over some thirty years or so — published *bits* of history. These ranged from 5000-word articles concerning my own specialist area (the struggles of unemployed workers in the Great Depression),<sup>1</sup> to the 730-page biography of author Charmian Clift, who was one of our society's transformational thinkers during the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> I had also had the great privilege of collaborating with some forty or so Anangu Elders and students from Papunya (Northern Territory) in the production of their multi-award-winning community history,<sup>3</sup> and of mentoring one of these Papunya Elders, Mary Malbunka, in the writing and illustration of her autobiographical picture book. As well, I had written a couple of historical novels,<sup>4</sup> and my historical picture book *My Place* (illustrated by Donna Rawlins)<sup>5</sup> had been read by two generations of readers and was soon to be produced as a twenty-six part television series (for which I would be engaged as historical consultant).

However, a history of Australia — the whole of Australia! — was something that for most of my life would have been beyond my most hubristic dreams. And then, for some mad reason in about 2004, I found myself discussing such a project with Erica Wagner, Publisher of Books for Children and Teenagers at Allen & Unwin, with whom I had already published a few books.

‘It has to be *my* history of Australia,’ I said in that first discussion. ‘It won't be some sort of sliced-white-bread, one-size-fits-all textbook.’

From the brief prospectus I sent to the publishers after that initial discussion, the project was also to be a history of growing up in Australia. Not a history of children in Australia, which had been written by Sue Fabian and Morag Loh,<sup>6</sup> or a history of Australian childhood, such as Jan Kociumbas had written.<sup>7</sup> And while my self-appointed topic was to be subtly different from either of those works, so was my audience. This was to be *for* as well as *about* young Australians and their families (although I reserved the right to interpret the word ‘young’ in any way I pleased).

But what do I mean by a history of growing up, and why does it matter?

### **A history of growing up**

My fascination with stories of growing up began during my own childhood.

‘Tell me about when you were a little girl,’ I used to say to my mother from

the age of about three or four.

‘Oh, you know all those old stories better than I do,’ she’d wearily reply.

‘But tell me again!’

And invariably she would.

I myself grew up without any brothers and sisters, and so my mother’s stories of a childhood lived in a large family — first on a dairy farm, and later in suburban Sydney — were as exotic as a fairytale to me. Ever since then, I have always loved to read about the lives of children — if and when I could ever find such accounts.

For here’s a weird thing: if you turn to the back of just about any general history of Australia, and look in the index for the words ‘children’ or ‘adolescents’ or ‘young people’, you will find nothing. Whether they are girls or boys, whether their families are wealthy or on welfare, and no matter what cultural background they come from, their history does not seem to rate.

To me, this is baffling. After all, most adults acknowledge that their individual experience of childhood has shaped who they have become in later life. Why, then, don’t they see that the collective experience of young Australians has helped to shape the nation we all live in today?

### **Children’s contribution to the economy**

Another reason that this gap in the record puzzles me is that our economy has always depended upon children. Although nowadays their role is mostly that of consumers, the idea of childhood as a time of freedom from responsibility is very new. For thousands upon thousands of years, the children of this land have contributed a significant part of their family’s income.

In traditional time, children gathered fruit and vegetables, eggs and insects as well as the grass-seed that was a staple food. They joined in the hunts for lizards and small marsupials. They caught fish and crabs, and they collected shellfish from the rocks. Children fetched water, and they brought firewood back to camp. This went on for generation after generation, millennium after millennium.

When the boats began to arrive from overseas, there were children aboard. Many more were soon born here of immigrant parents. Together they worked to

build the colony. Over the next century and a half, children made bricks, milked cows, carted water, weeded crops, panned for gold, delivered produce, and watched over flocks of sheep. Children worked long hours in shearing sheds and on railway gangs, in factories and shops and mines. They were drovers and cooks, rabbit-trappers and housemaids. And indeed, even today, some young Australians still contribute to the family income. In the homes of many new immigrants, children help in family businesses as well as acting as translators and interpreters, and just last week I visited a boarding school in the Riverina where the students go home on weekends because their family farms are dependent upon their labour.

### **The biographies of young history-makers**

While I can readily point to the enormous contribution that young Australians have made to our national history, this doesn't show how history felt while those young people were living it. *Australians All* attempts to fill this gap with about eighty mini-biographies of young makers of history. I hope that by entering these lives — even just for a few minutes — my readers will be able to imagine what it may have been like to be that other young Australian, growing up in another place and time.

The first of these young history-makers to be included is a teenage girl who died at Lake Mungo about 25,000 years ago. Although we do not know her name, we do know that she was loved and respected by her family and her clan, because her funerary remains are regarded by archaeologists as the world's earliest ritual cremation. Other stories from the historical period before 1788 include accounts of families living in long-term seasonal camps of seal-hunters (in what is now Tasmania) and eel-farmers (in south-west Victoria), as well as desert-dwellers from the Pintupi lands of the western desert, the river-folk of the mighty Murray-Darling and the islanders from Mer, in the Torres Strait.

Following on from this traditional era of our nation's past, the history jumps across the world to Britain, for I found that I needed to show the society from which our continent's first big wave of immigrants would come. After setting the scene of the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions, I bring this era to life with accounts of the childhood of the young country boy, John Clare, and of the London apprentice, Francis Place. There is also Thomas Wood, who started work at a spinning mill at

the age of eight, and young Lucy Luck, whose family ended up in the workhouse after the death of her drunkard father. Further up the social scale there is the tale of a boy called Matthew Flinders, who dreamed of adventure, and an account of the education of a girl called Ann Chapelle, who vowed never to marry a sailor. And finally there is biographical information about a child burglar and a teenage shoplifter, who both arrived in Australia in January 1788.

Already, of course, adults reading this article will be starting to recognise some of the names attached to my mini-biographies. (Yes, it is *that* Matthew Flinders, thanks to whom our own continent got its name.) Other children in the book who became famous because of their adult achievements include a few internationally-renowned figures, such as scientist Mark Oliphant, sporting legend Donald Bradman, and even Australia's first official saint. Mary Cameron (later known as Mary Gilmore) and Henry Lawson went on to become well-known writers, as did Thomas Brown (who used the pen-name Rolf Boldrewood), Ethel Turner, Ethel (Henry Handel) Richardson, Arthur Davis (Steele Rudd), Roland Robinson, Vincent Buckley, Barbara Jefferis, and George Johnston.

If this list suggests a bit of a bias towards writers, the reason is simply that writers tend to leave vivid accounts of their childhood. The subjects of my other mini-biographies went on to shape our national story in a variety of non-literary ways. For example, Mary Haydock, who stole a horse while she was pretending to be a boy called James Burrow, became the colonial merchant known as Mary Reibey, whose portrait is on our twenty-dollar note. Bill Morrow (who began work on the Queensland railways as a nipper at the age of twelve) and James Comerford (who was barely out of short pants when he participated in the 1929 Hunter Valley miners' lockout) spent their lives fighting for the rights of workers. Isabel Flick from Collarenebri in western New South Wales and Hilda Muir from Borroloola (Northern Territory) fought on behalf of their people, as did William Barak, who was born beside the Yarra Yarra before Europeans came to Victoria. And Eddie Mabo, who grew up on the tiny Torres Strait Island of Mer during World War II, went on to mount a legal battle that has helped all Australians reinterpret the history of their land.

Of course, not all the young Australians whose stories are told in this book

became known outside their families and communities. However, the lives of every single one of them opens a kind of window into our national story. One of my favourites among the lesser-known history-makers is Bou Youk Tong, who was born in Melbourne's Chinatown at the time when the White Australia Policy was passed by our first federal parliament. Some fifteen years later, this English-speaking girl was faced with the threat of a Dictation Test in an unfamiliar language when she returned to her birth-country after a trip to her parents' homeland. (This account is illustrated with a facsimile image of Bou Youk's handprint and the family photograph from what was effectively the Tongs' security file.)

Thankfully, I am able to report that this sixteen-year-old was allowed to re-enter Australia, and went on to live a long and happy life in which she raised six children. Some of the book's other history-makers also left a particular legacy through their descendents. For example, the daughter of a 'clever man' from the Booreberongal clan of the Hawkesbury River district was one of the first generation of Stolen Children. In 1818 she won the top educational prize in the colony of New South Wales when she was tested against non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous students, and under the name of Maria Locke she went on to found a family that now claims seven thousand members. For many of the Darug people of western Sydney, she is the ancestor from whom they trace their Aboriginal heritage.

And as I write this, I feel my heart reaching out to Ann Forbes, the London street kid and teenage shoplifter who arrived here on the First Fleet when she was fifteen. She was my great-great-great grandmother. Sometimes I find myself thinking: if Ann Forbes had not committed the crime that brought her to Botany Bay — then my own history could never have happened.

### **Reading and living in ignorance of the end of the story**

Whatever public or private level of recognition my eighty history-makers may have achieved in their *adult* lives, it is important to reiterate that my concern has only been with them while they were growing up. In the notes at the end of the book, I provide information about the later lives of my subjects, as well as primary and secondary source references that allow readers to follow this up for themselves. However — and I cannot over-emphasise the importance of this — all the time in

writing *Australians All* I had to keep in mind the fact that many, if not most, of my audience would come to these biographies without knowing what happened after the subject finished growing up.

Of course, if my young readers don't know what is going to happen, nor do my young subjects. Thus my focus in the tale of 'the two Marys' (as I dub Cameron/Gilmore and MacKillop) is the similarity in the childhoods of two country girls who were so passionate about learning that by the age of thirteen and fourteen they were themselves teaching other children. Mark Oliphant's story is also a tale of education: in his case, of a lad who didn't do very well at school, but who liked to spend his time making what he called 'raggedy-baggedy engines' — some of which had an exciting habit of exploding. (I wonder what would happen these days to a boy who mixed up white gunpowder on the kitchen table.) Arthur Davis's childhood reveals what it was like to grow up on a 'selection' in rural Queensland, but at that time he did not know that the family farm would acquire a capital "S" and become the setting of the highly popular book, *On Our Selection*. And while snooty Melbourne schoolgirls were excluding a poor and dowdy classmate from their private club, it did not occur to them that the clever and unpopular 'Ettie' Richardson would go on to write about them in one of the classics of Australian literature. Even more crucially, as young Eddie Mabo picked up traditional Meriam land law from his father, he had no idea that this knowledge would overturn the myth of *terra nullius*.

(Surely I do not need to point out here the subtext, or perhaps it is the corollary, of my argument: that my readers will also go on to make history in ways that they cannot yet imagine.)

### **Individual lives within a national context**

While I hope that, taken together, these biographical accounts illuminate our national history, for me the most important question as I researched and wrote these biographies was always: what made this young Australian who she or he was, as an individual? These children and their stories are not 'case studies' — 'typical' of this or that or some other 'aspect' of some 'issue'. For me, and I hope for my readers, each of these lives is unique, and important in its own right.

As I was researching the subjects of these biographies, some of the recurring questions I asked were: What was their family like? What sort of education did they have (whether formal or informal)? What chores or work did they do? What other responsibilities did they have? And (most importantly) what did they do for fun?

Yet, of course, these small and individual lives are positioned into a framework of much bigger national (and sometimes international) events, covering about 40,000 years. When I was doing my research for this ‘big picture’ part of the book, the first question I continually asked myself was to do with the land itself. As I learned during the four years I spent working as a consultant at the school in the Aboriginal community of Papunya, *ngurra* or country is at the centre of life. And so I found I needed to start this book with the geology of the continent, and the particularly Australian law of harmony that informs our environment. This research took me way beyond my historical comfort-zone of the twentieth century, all the way back into the Pleistocene era, or that time that is often referred to as the Ice Age

Moving on from the land itself, my second major question was concerned with how Australians have interacted with their environment over the last fifty thousand years or so. But indeed: who are Australians? And what does it mean, to be an Australian?

While the answer to those questions changes over time, the most recent one I give is that of a contemporary Melbourne schoolgirl, Nadine Rabah, who traces her Australian identity to her mother’s arrival from Lebanon in 1984 as an eleven-year-old refugee. When Nadine herself was aged eleven, she broke through the gender stereotyping done both by her Muslim community and by Australian society in general when she became the first girl to join her local AFL Under 12s team, and then went on to win Best and Fairest for the season. A few years later, she played every game in the season while still observing her fast for the month of Ramadan. For Nadine, ‘Being an Australian means wanting to be mates with everyone... It means wanting to live in peace and harmony with each other, being free and independent, giving a helping hand when needed, treating everyone fairly, *and* enjoying the great game of football.’

It is no accident that the book is called *Australians All*.

## Historiography

Every book about history is also a book about the writing of history. Of course, the accepted way of doing that changes over time.

During the 1950s, when I myself was growing up, History (it always had a capital in those days!) was a story about what men did. These were not ordinary men, such as the fathers and uncles and shopkeepers and bus drivers whom I met in my everyday life. They were powerful men, famous men. Most of them were white. All of them were dead. They were kings and politicians, generals and explorers. They didn't interest me very much.

The place where History occurred was nearly always overseas. Britain and Greece and Rome and France and somewhere called the Fertile Crescent: that was where everything important seemed to have taken place.

The time when History happened was long before I was born. Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome were obviously centuries ago, but so was the War of the Roses and even the French Revolution. The closest that History ever came to *me* — in time and space — was Federation. That was the mysterious thing illustrated by a picture of two old men with bushy beards and top hats.

Looking back, I find it puzzling that I even liked History when I was growing up. And yet, despite the fact that it was so irrelevant to my life and my experience, the thing that kept me going was *story*. Although the characters were dull and the setting was unfamiliar, the narrative pulled me in. What I quickly learned to do was to use my imagination to make my own little worlds between the strings of facts and dates.

And so I was an acrobat in Minoan Crete. I was a page at the court of the Tudors. I watched heads roll when the French aristocrats paid their visit to Madame Guillotine. I daubed my face with woad (whatever that was!) and resisted the invasion of Caesar's army. I even invented the wheel in the valley between the twin rivers. I was damned if I was going to be left out of history, just because I was female and Australian and young and alive!

When my school days at last were over, I went to university. This was in the latter part of the 1960s, when so many ideas were turned on their heads. One of the newly upside-down things was the study of the past. My rather jaded love of history

was suddenly revived by the discovery of History From Below — a new type of historiography, which aimed to include the experiences of the 'forgotten' people who had been left out of the historical narrative because they were at the bottom of the social pyramid. Suddenly ordinary men were part of history: the men who made the English working class; the men of France who made the revolution. Although these men had left few written records, the new type of labour historians miraculously managed to rescue their lives from oblivion.

Obviously, however, a big gap remained. And so within a few years, feminist historians were researching and writing about some of the women whose lives and contributions had previously been ignored. And very soon, in Australia as well as America, there was a demand that history also include the struggles and stories of black people — of Aboriginal Australians and of Afro-Americans.

Thanks to this change in historiography, we now have stories of poor people as well as rich people, women as well as men, Indigenous people as well as immigrants, the oppressed as well as the oppressor, the invaded as well as the invaders. As far as the history of our own country is concerned, the most significant development has been the writing and recording of Indigenous history by Indigenous historians —including the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have told their personal stories in memoirs and oral histories, and those who have recorded it in film and on canvas. In recent years, Australian historiography has also famously become a war zone, with pitched battles over the interpretation of some of our national stories.

And yet, some fifty years after history began to be written from below, it still does not include the experiences of the people who are truly at the bottom of the social pyramid. I mean, of course, young people.

### **The digital revolution**

If historiography in the twenty-first century continues to ignore the role and contribution of young Australians, the way in which young Australians themselves study history in the new millennium is very different from the way in which *my* generation did it. Obviously, the curriculum has changed over the last five decades — and indeed it is currently in the process of becoming a national curriculum.

However, it is not this that I am talking about.

The huge change that I have had to bear in mind through the writing of *Australians All* is the one brought about by the digital revolution. Today, even young children embarking on a history project turn first to the internet — where, at the click of a mouse, they find information and images about pretty well anything... and everything. This in itself can be a problem.

Firstly, which 'fact' do you choose, out of so many? And where did it come from? Is it indeed a fact, or an opinion, or a mistake, or maybe even a deliberate falsehood? While it is terrific that Wikipedia and other such sites are written by 'ordinary' people (History from Below indeed!), the anonymity of these authors means that they cannot be held accountable for their research or their views.

Secondly, when we gather bits of information from the internet, we tend to move sideways between sites, rather than along a timeline. In this way of reading history, it is very easy to lose track of the order of events, and to miss seeing how one thing can cause (or at least have an effect upon) another. A similar problem arises if we only encounter history as a series of 'case studies', and never place these stories along a chronological line. (I remember some years ago hearing an academic on a panel at a writers' festival say that one of her university students had responded to her lecture about World War II with the question: 'Does the fact that you refer to a *second* world war imply that there was a first one?') In writing *Australians All*, therefore, I was determined to provide a strong chronological structure.

If what I have said seems to quarrel with the idea of doing online research, that's not intended. The very fact that my readers will simultaneously be consulting digital sources is for me a liberation. In the past, if a family lashed out and bought a general history of Australia for the home, they would expect — as some kind of bottom line — that it would contain all the 'facts' that their kids needed for their homework. How many convicts came on the First Fleet? What year did Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson cross the Blue Mountains? How many diggers died at Gallipoli? And indeed, *was* there a first world war before the second one?

These kinds of facts are important, but in themselves they are as useful as series of football scores. In writing *Australians All*, I didn't need to include a whole lot of dates and statistics because I know they will be found on the internet. Instead,

I can use my 280 pages of allotted space to try to put this information into a consistent interpretative framework. This is precisely what cannot be got from a variety of websites.

### **Interpreting the past for young people**

Recently, at a conference of historians, I was asked to give a paper on the topic of 'Interpreting the past for young people'. In my opening remarks, I said that the way I interpret history for young people is the same as the way I interpret history for old people. This got me a good laugh, but I am not sure why. Indeed, I am completely at a loss as to how I could go about my job in any other way.

As an example, let us come straight to what could be regarded as the most contentious question: 'How does one write for a young audience about what happened to the Aboriginal people of Tasmania?'

The answer can only be: 'Truthfully.'

Of course, the History Wars were fought because one historian's truth is another historian's lies. Yet this only shows that the difficulty of interpretation (sometimes known as bias) is not limited to the writing of history for the young. Certainly, in writing the Tasmanian passages of the book I never tried to ameliorate or indeed whitewash the facts to make my account somehow more acceptable either to my young audience or to their adult gatekeepers, and indeed I sent this material in draft form to the Indigenous Curator at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, and sought his input and advice. (Naturally, I myself take responsibility for any mistakes of fact or interpretation I may have made.)

Overall, in regard to this question of what is suitable for young people, I again point to the huge social and political changes that have happened over the last fifty or so years.

When I myself was growing up, children and even teenagers were not told about the bad and sad things that had happened in our national story — or indeed, about contemporary dangers that were occurring on the Cold War stage. And yet, while we were shielded from reality in this way, we still had to cope with trouble and pain that occurred in our own lives; such as, in my own case, the death of my mother when I was nine, and subsequently the disappearance of my father and my

placement in a foster family where I always felt like an outsider. Compared with that, there was nothing in history that could have made me anxious.

Perhaps as a result of my own childhood, I believe that anyone who is old enough to watch the news on television is also old enough to know that there were times in Australian history when some adults were violent and abusive. In the past that we all share, there was greed and racism. There was also amazing courage and goodwill and friendship and sacrifice. Anyone who is old enough to survive in a school playground knows that there are times when even good people act in bad or selfish ways.

I also believe that if our nation is itself to grow up, then young Australians need to know some of the pain of the past, as well as the happiness. Without darkness, we cannot see the light.

<sup>1</sup> See for example Nadia Wheatley, 'Meeting Them at the Door: Radicalism, Militancy and the Sydney Anti-Eviction Campaign of 1931', *Twentieth Century Sydney*, ed. Jill Roe, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1980; 'The Disinherited of the Earth?' *The Wasted Years?* ed. Judy Mackinolty, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1981; 'All in the Same Boat? Sydney's Rich and Poor in the Great Depression', *Making a Life, A People's History of Australia*, ed. Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee, McPhee Gribble, Penguin, Melbourne, 1988

<sup>2</sup> Nadia Wheatley, *The Life and Myth of Charmian Clift*, HarperCollins, Ryde, 2001

<sup>3</sup> *Papunya School Book of Country and History*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 2001

<sup>4</sup> Nadia Wheatley, *The House That Was Eureka*, Viking Kestrel, Melbourne, 1985; Nadia Wheatley, *A Banner Bold*, Scholastic Australia, Lindfield, 2000

<sup>5</sup> Nadia Wheatley and Donna Rawlins, *My Place*, Dove, Melbourne, 1987

<sup>6</sup> Sue Fabian and Morag Loh, *Children in Australia, An Outline History*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1980

<sup>7</sup> Jan Kociumbas, *Australian Childhood, A History*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1997