

Editorial

Challenging Narratives: New perspectives on authority, identity, and colonial Australia

On 25 February 2025, I hosted an event at History House, looking to explore the historic intent of this *Journal* and how to ensure fidelity moving forward as Editor. It must be said with some modesty that this *Journal* was not the first history journal in Australia – that was the *Transactions* of the defunct Victorian Historical Society of Australasia – but this *Journal* is the oldest. The *JRAHS* began in 1906.¹ The success is in its original design.

Although there had been an original intent to publish quarterly and to charge members for a copy, it was hoped to create a divide between those that could have a copy (members), and those who could not (non-members). A good move, I would say. Membership doubled in the following three years.²

Now with many thanks to the ever-diligent Donna Newton and Phillip Jaworski I can say that to date there have been 110 volumes, 1872 articles (approximately) by some 1096 contributors (approximately).

Not all volumes or articles are equal. Like anything, there has been growth and decay. The early issues of the *Journal* were brief and discursive, and focused on New South Wales. I find, reviewing the journal, that the forging of Australian identities post-Gallipoli saw an increase in wider Australian history, away from King, Macquarie, Darling and Bligh and towards wider federal history. By 1939, the *Journal* stood out as the leading publication of its kind in Australia. In opening the newly acquired History House in February 1941, Stephen Roberts, Professor of History at the University of Sydney noted that:

No student of the early days of Australian development could cover his ground without working in detail on the heterogeneous, but amazingly inclusive, series of papers in the *Journal*.³

The history of the 1940s to 1960s found within the *Journal* can be simply described as ‘Eternal Great Line of White Male Progression’ – Australian history was seen to be brought about by men of action such as governors, pastoralists, explorers, businessmen. Women were not even seen – let alone heard – on the pages. The pages were white, and the history white, notwithstanding the black ink and black history sometimes referred to.

1 *Journal and Proceedings* / Australian Historical Society vol 1, pt 1, 1901 (first published March 1906). ‘Royal’ was added in July 1918 (*JRAHS*, vol 4, pt 6, 1918).

2 See the ‘Eighteenth Annual Report, 1918’, p 2, *JRAHS*, vol 4, 1918.

3 History House Official Opening [No 8 Young Street, Sydney], *JRAHS*, vol 27, pt 1, pp 7-10.

In 1954 the *Journal* had its first dedicated editor – Professor Alan Shaw. I am the eighth. There have been three women and five men since 1954. Of those 71 years, however, women have been the editor for 48. A majority of the credit therefore for the revitalisation of the *Journal* must go to Hazel King, Carol Liston and Christine Yeats, and I have appreciated the latter two's guidance. This is a journal for members, independent historians, professional historians. With the rise of professional history beyond the university walls, the *Journal* has come back to its roots, to provide opportunities to embrace a wider community of researchers, writers, and practitioners.

It is delightful then, as Editor, that this issue is so diverse and meets the original intent: a journal by members, for members, addressing critical aspects of Australian history. The articles in this issue highlight the complexity of Australia's past, bringing fresh perspectives to pivotal events, individuals and institutions. Spanning the late 18th century to the 20th century, these studies reflect on power dynamics, contested histories, and the broader implications of historical narratives in shaping Australian identity.

One recurring theme is the intersection of authority and resistance. Dr Keith Amos's study of the spearing of Governor Arthur Phillip in 1790 re-evaluates the long-held assumption that the attack was a ritualised response within Aboriginal legal traditions. Instead, Amos posits that it was an instinctive act of personal defence, challenging dominant interpretations of Indigenous-settler interactions in early Sydney.

The implications of this are profound: it moves beyond simplistic readings of Indigenous justice systems and forces us to consider the immediate and human reactions of individuals during a fraught colonial encounter. Phillip, often portrayed as an enlightened leader attempting to maintain peace with the First Nations people, found himself at the receiving end of a moment of Indigenous resistance. This reassessment compels us to reconsider colonial narratives that depict Indigenous people as either noble savages or passive victims, instead positioning them as active participants in shaping their own destinies.

Similarly, Dr Geoffrey Gray's examination of anthropologist Frederick G. G. Rose's fraught relationship with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) demonstrates how government institutions have historically navigated – or curtailed – academic freedom when confronted with politically inconvenient research. Rose, a scholar who did not conform to prevailing political ideologies, found himself ostracised despite the academic merit of his work.

The intersection of political power and academic discourse remains highly relevant today, as debates rage over the role of funding bodies, research agendas, and ideological influences in the modern academy. The questions raised by Rose's struggles are still with us: Who controls knowledge production? How do governments and institutions filter history to suit their narratives? These are not relics of the past but ongoing issues that shape how history is studied and taught.

A second thread running through this issue is the hidden histories of individuals whose lives were shaped by secrecy or political intrigue. Dr Mark St Leon's biography of John Clark, a respected early settler of Wagga Wagga who concealed his fugitive past, reminds us that the colonial world was one of reinvention as much as it was of punishment and exile. Clark's story underscores the fluidity of identity in Australia's early years. In a land where many arrived in shackles, the ability to remake oneself was not just a matter of ambition but of survival. His tale resonates with modern discussions around identity, belonging, and the evolving perceptions of Australia as a land of opportunity, as well as the persistent tensions surrounding migration and assimilation.

Meanwhile, Chris Maxworthy's analysis of the Spanish plan to attack Sydney in 1796 unearths a little-known episode in Australia's early strategic history, highlighting the precarious position of the nascent penal colony in the global imperial contest between Britain and Spain. This story serves as a reminder that Australia's history has always been deeply entwined with international power struggles. The fact that the Spanish Crown considered Sydney a legitimate target for destruction disrupts the often insular narratives of Australia's colonial past, which tend to focus almost exclusively on Britain. It prompts us to rethink the region's strategic significance beyond British colonial ambitions and consider the wider geopolitical forces that shaped its early years.

These re-examinations are particularly relevant today as Australia continues to grapple with the legacies of colonisation, national identity, and the control of historical narratives. The reassessment of Governor Phillip's spearing feeds into broader contemporary discussions about the agency of Indigenous Australians in early colonial encounters, moving beyond simplified narratives of victimhood or complicity.⁴ The continued reinterpretation of such events reflects a shift in historical scholarship, where Indigenous perspectives are no longer treated as peripheral but as central to understanding Australia's past.⁵

Similarly, the case of Frederick G. G. Rose raises pressing questions about the role of government influence in academic research and the limitations placed on intellectual freedom in politically sensitive areas,⁶ an issue that remains pertinent in

4 See on this Samuel White, 'Braiding Boomerangs: A Reappraisal of the Law of Conquest in 1788', Ch 3 in David Jefferson (ed), *New Zealand Yearbook of International Law* 2024, Brill Nijhoff, 2024, pp 82-132.

5 Chelsea Watego, *Another Day in the Colony*, UQ Press, 2021.

6 Brendan Walker-Munro, 'Foreign Interference and Higher Education Research: AUKUS as a Case Study', *Journal of Higher Education Management*, vol 39, no 1, May 2024, pp 41-42, 44, 47; Australian Research Council, 'Research Security', <https://www.arc.gov.au/funding-research/research-security>; National Institute of Standards and Technology, 'Research Security Program', <https://www.nist.gov/adlp/research-security-program>.

the current climate of increased government scrutiny of research funding and public discourse.

The biographies of Clark and Bustamante also provide insight into ongoing debates about identity and historical memory. Clark's ability to reinvent himself in colonial Australia speaks to a larger theme of personal reinvention that continues to be an integral part of the nation's social fabric, particularly in discussions surrounding migration and belonging. It is a trend that is made easier, and harder, in an era of post-privacy data.

Australia has long grappled with questions of national identity – whether in relation to its British heritage, its multicultural present, or its future role in the Asia-Pacific region.⁷ Meanwhile, Bustamante's overlooked role in Spanish imperial strategy reminds us that Australia's colonial history was not solely a British affair – something that challenges prevailing Anglo-centric interpretations and encourages a more nuanced view of Australia's place in global history. This is especially relevant in a time when Australia is reassessing its historical ties and seeking to forge stronger regional relationships.⁸

These revisions are part of a broader historiographical shift that seeks to uncover alternative perspectives and challenge dominant historical paradigms. Over the past few decades, scholars have increasingly questioned traditional narratives that marginalised non-British influences, overlooked Indigenous agency, and downplayed the transnational dimensions of Australian history. The emergence of global history approaches, post-colonial scholarship, and critical Indigenous studies has pushed historians to rethink the ways in which Australia's past is framed and understood. The articles in this issue contribute to this broader movement, demonstrating how revisiting and reinterpreting historical events can yield fresh insights and challenge entrenched assumptions. In doing so, they also highlight the stakes of history itself – whose voices are heard, whose perspectives are marginalised, and how the stories we tell about the past shape our national identity in the present.

Together, these articles enrich our understanding of Australian history by challenging established narratives and recovering overlooked perspectives. They collectively highlight how historical figures – whether governors, fugitives, scholars or naval officers – were shaped by the structures of power they navigated, often in

7 C. E. W. Bean, 'Sidelights of the war on Australian character', *JRAHS*, vol 13, pt 4, 1927, pp 209-223

8 Such as the colonial history that must be dealt with in the proposed negotiations of an Australian-Papua New Guinean defence treaty, announced 24 February 2025; Australia, Defence Ministers, 'Joint Statement: Australia-Papua New Guinea Defence Ministers' Meeting', <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2025-02-20/joint-statement-australia-papua-new-guinea-defence-ministers-meeting>.

unpredictable ways. In doing so, they reinforce the importance of re-examining past events to gain a fuller appreciation of Australia's complex and contested history. Moreover, they remind us that history is not static but a continuous dialogue between the past and the present, one that demands ongoing critical engagement to remain relevant in contemporary debates about Australia's national identity and historical consciousness.

By interrogating the past with fresh eyes, we do more than fill in the gaps – we fundamentally reshape the way we understand the forces that have shaped this country. These studies are a testament to the power of history to illuminate, to provoke, and ultimately, to redefine our collective understanding of who we are.

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