Editorial

Truth, memory, and the public work of history

The closing issue of 2025 brings together five very different yet deeply interconnected studies of how Australians have told, contested, and revised their own pasts. Perhaps unprecedented, this issue also sees three authors returning to the pages of the *Journal* within two years: James Cotton,[1] Bruce Pennay[2] and Des Lambley.[3] Each contribution within this issue reveals that the writing of history is never a passive exercise in record-keeping but a public act – a dialogue between evidence, memory, and moral imagination.

Whether situated in a museum, a pulpit, an artist's camp, or a protest movement, the authors in this issue explore the delicate balance between truth and interpretation, between individual conscience and institutional authority. The result is a collection that demonstrates, in strikingly diverse ways, the continuing vitality of historical inquiry in shaping civic understanding. It is an exciting issue.

Dr Mark Clayton's *Guarding against the guardian: Reassessing revisionism at the Australian War Memorial* opens the volume with a meditation on what it means to 'revise' responsibly. His study focuses on a single artefact – the Australian War Memorial's Wirraway aircraft, long celebrated for its supposed destruction of a Japanese Zero in 1942, and more recently the subject of controversy. He approaches the issue head on. In tracing the debate between those who sought to overturn that account and those who defended it, Clayton transforms a technical question of aviation history into a philosophical one about truth and trust at a time just when the Australian War Memorial is in the scope.[4]

Revision, he reminds us, is not a sin but the lifeblood of the historical discipline – provided that it rests on rigorous evidence and open debate. His analysis cuts to the heart of Australia's ongoing struggle to reconcile the emotional imperatives of commemoration with the intellectual rigour of scholarship. The Australian War Memorial, he suggests, embodies both impulses: a site of reverence and a repository of research. To 'guard against the guardian' is to insist that memory be held to the same standards as history itself, lest it become myth by sentiment or omission.

If Clayton's essay addresses the ethics of institutional memory, Dr James Cotton's *'One of the Few International Journalists in Australia': Andrew Melville Pooley in Tokyo and Sydney* moves outward to the cosmopolitan networks of the interwar years, when Australians first began to imagine themselves as actors on a global stage. Through meticulous reconstruction of a largely forgotten career – a particular strength of Cotton's – this article brings to life Andrew Melville Pooley: a journalist, lecturer, and early internationalist whose reporting from Japan in the 1920s helped expose corruption at the highest levels of government.

Pooley's investigations into the collusion between arms manufacturers and the Imperial Navy were sensational enough to precipitate a ministerial fall in Tokyo, yet his subsequent work as foreign editor of Sydney's *Evening News* had an equally enduring impact, reshaping how Australians understood world affairs.

Cotton's portrait of Pooley is at once biographical and historiographical: it invites reflection on the power of journalism to construct international consciousness. In an age when news could travel no faster than the telegraph and a correspondent's credibility depended on both courage and contacts, Pooley stands as a precursor to the modern foreign correspondent – simultaneously observer and participant, broker and storyteller. In recovering his voice, Cotton recovers a moment when Australian journalism began to look outward not merely as a colonial appendage but as an independent interlocutor with the world.

Dr Des Lambley's *AIF Padre, Captain Father Thomas Joseph O'Donnell: His court-martial – beyond all reasonable doubt* builds thematically off his article last year to the intimate theatre of conscience. The figure at its centre – an Irish-Australian priest who defied his archbishop to enlist, served his soldiers with pastoral zeal, and later found himself court-martialled in Ireland for supposed disloyalty – embodies the tangled loyalties of a divided empire.

Through painstaking reconstruction of military records and personal correspondence, Lambley presents O'Donnell as both patriot and suspect, a man whose faith in Australia and in his Church was tested by the politics of Irish independence. His account of O'Donnell's ordeal unfolds like a parable about identity and belonging. Yet Lambley resists melodrama. His aim is to restore complexity.

O'Donnell emerges neither martyr nor traitor but a man navigating competing duties: to God, to nation, and to moral truth. In doing so, Lambley reframes the Great War as not only a military conflict but a crucible for Australian pluralism, where questions of loyalty, ethnicity, and conscience were played out in the bodies and souls of individuals. His essay stands as a reminder that the discipline of history gains its moral depth not from abstraction but from empathy – the effort to understand another's conviction without collapsing it into stereotype.

Rhys Knapton-Lonsdale's *Protesting the End of the World: The WA nuclear disarmament movement of the 1980s*, carries this concern with conscience and creativity into the late 20th century, where history becomes an instrument of activism. His study of the People for Nuclear Disarmament (WA) traces how citizens, faced with the existential dread of the Cold War, transformed fear into political organisation. In reconstructing the movement's formation, its brief parliamentary success through the election of Senator Jo Vallentine and its subsequent fragmentation, Knapton-Lonsdale uncovers the cultural and emotional labour of protest. The activists he describes were historians in their own right: their

banners invoked Hiroshima, their pamphlets recited the lessons of Vietnam, and their marches claimed continuity with the moral protests of earlier generations.

Knapton-Lonsdale's essay reveals how social movements write history from below by reinterpreting the national narrative of defence and citizenship to include the defence of life itself. Western Australia emerges here as a crucible of ideas that would later nourish the Australian Greens. Through interviews, archival leaflets and press material, Knapton-Lonsdale captures a moment when idealism, fatigue, and conviction collided. In doing so, he reminds us that history is not merely what we remember but what we choose to repeat or resist.

Supporting the substantive articles is *Picturing Civilisation*, in which Bruce Pennay OAM and Yalmambirra – historian and Wiradjuri elder – undertake a joint reading of a drawing by the 19th-century artist Yakaduna (Tommy McRae). Their essay begins with a single image but unfolds into an argument about historical method itself. For them, McRae's *Civilisation* is more than an artwork. It is a text in visual form, a statement of cultural resilience and subtle resistance. Working together, Pennay and Yalmambirra show how McRae's line work – at once delicate and defiant – encodes commentary on the encounters between Wiradjuri communities and the settler societies along the Murray.

The paper's quiet power lies in its method: it is not written *about* McRae but *with* him, in conversation with the artist's world and with each other's expertise. The collaboration demonstrates what contemporary Australian historiography increasingly recognises – that truth-telling requires partnership, not extraction. By situating *Civilisation* within both colonial archives and living cultural memory, the authors invite readers to 'see historically' in a new way: to regard images as repositories of argument, to understand art as a mode of historical reasoning. The drawing becomes a mirror reflecting two centuries of endurance, irony and survival, its title at once critique and prophecy.

Read together, these five contributions trace a moral arc from authority to agency, from the guarded institution to the public conscience. Clayton's War Memorial inquiry insists on evidence as the foundation of trust. Cotton's rediscovery of Pooley celebrates the individual who brings the world home through reportage. Lambley's portrait of O'Donnell exposes the cost of integrity in a divided empire. Pennay and Yalmambirra's dialogue around McRae redefines the historian's relationship to Indigenous knowledge. Knapton-Lonsdale's chronicle of disarmament activism closes the sequence with an assertion of collective moral will. Each, in its own way, defends the principle that history is a discipline of listening – to records, to witnesses, to images, to the living and the dead.

In bringing these works together, the *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* continues a conversation that has animated it since its founding in 1901: how to connect rigorous scholarship with civic purpose. The Society has long stood at the

junction of professional and community history, of archive and public debate. That tradition is visible here in the diversity of the contributors themselves – an emeritus professor, a recent doctoral graduate, a veteran historian, a Wiradjuri elder, and a young scholar fresh from honours research. Their co-existence within a single issue speaks to a broader truth about Australian historiography: that it thrives when it draws strength from multiple generations and perspectives.

The collective message of this volume is that history's authority depends on its openness. To revise is not to repudiate; to critique is not to betray. Clayton's insistence that revisionism must remain evidence-based resonates beyond the museum. It offers a caution to every historian confronting the seductions of ideology or outrage. Cotton's reconstruction of Pooley reminds us that the first casualty of propaganda – whether in 1925 or 2025 – is curiosity itself. Lambley's patient empathy with O'Donnell invites humility before moral complexity. Pennay and Yalmambirra's shared gaze demonstrates that vision itself is historical, shaped by who is permitted to look and to speak. And Knapton-Lonsdale's chronicle of nuclear protest closes the circle by transforming fear into responsibility.

These are not simply stories about the past; they are meditations on how the past continues to authorise, constrain and inspire the present. The Wirraway and the Zero remind us that even artefacts of war can become battlefields of interpretation. The journalist in Tokyo reveals how information networks shape national identity. The chaplain's trial exposes the fragility of tolerance within the imperial order. The artist's drawing testifies to endurance beyond conquest. The disarmament movement recalls that historical imagination is not confined to scholars: it belongs equally to those who act upon their understanding of the past. History, as these authors show, is both remembrance and responsibility – a living practice of dialogue between those who came before and those who must decide what comes next.

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Notes

[1] James Cotton, 'Chungking Follies: The supporting cast of the Chungking Legation, 1941-42', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society,* vol 109, pt 2, 2023, pp 187-209.
[2] Bruce Pennay, 'Interpreting an Image: George Augustus Robinson's Yass to Port Phillip Road, 1840–1844', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol 110, pt 1, 2024, pp 90-99.
[3] Des Lambley, 'A Retrospective of Military Law and Justice in the Australian Imperial Force', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol 110, pt 2, 2024, pp 161-180.
[4] In 2025, a *Four Corners* episode ('Sacrifice' broadcast ABC, 10 March 2025) was aired that questioned, among other things, the propriety of a War Memorial taking funding from an arms manufacturer.