The History Wars
by Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark
Melbourne University Press, 2003, 274pp., $29.95
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It is odd for an author to entitle a book The History Wars when he believes that the 'warriors' are to be found only on one side. In reality when Stuart Macintyre talks about the History Wars what he really has in mind is something like the Barbarians against the Innocents. Saint Stuart the knight in shining armour seeks manfully, and in his eyes against the odds, to prevent the massacre of the History Innocents by the evil Barbarians from the op-ed pages.

In other words this book is not a work of scholarship. It is a highly ideological and polemical book and must be treated as such. Its primary arguments are derived from the pro-Communist polemics of the Cold War. Macintyre is a former Communist and this book demonstrates that you can take the boy out of the Party but you cannot take the Party out of the boy.

'History Warrior' hearkens back to the term 'Cold War Warrior' just as the overall structure of the book is based on the idea that the History Warriors are engaged in a new bout of McCarthyism. Australian historians are the contemporary equivalent of the Hollywood producers and actors of the 1950s. They are decent blokes and blokettes just going about their business of historical inquiry who have been unfairly persecuted by fanatics from outside the profession.

Macintyre's response to my criticism of the book in The Australian on 3 September illustrates this point. He refuses to name me or to acknowledge that I am a professionally trained historian with a substantial publication record. To do so would be to admit that there is a genuine History War going on amongst historians, which is in fact the case. Instead he prefers to imply the false idea that I was somehow put up to write the article by the newspaper's editor.

Anyone who has existed within academia knows that to portray it as a world of innocents is a sick joke. Historians, like other academics, often go in hard. Their preference is to do their dirty work in secret by ensuring that research with which they disagree does not receive funding or that the fruits of that research never appears in print. In fact the 'History Warriors' have done the Australian community a big favour by ensuring that controversial ideas are not snuffed out behind the walls of the Public Record Office as is the case.

But apparently this is too much for Stuart Macintyre who would prefer that only historians certified by people like him (and he does certify a lot as an examiner of PhD theses) should be allowed to speak on historical matters. Fortunately history does not belong to academic historians despite the scorn that they sometimes pour on those operating outside the university. Historical debates are by their nature public debates. It is wrong to try to exclude some from participating in them.

In a sense this is what Macintyre as the self-appointed shop steward of the history profession is trying to do in this book: argue the case for a closed shop in historical debate. The real problem with such a view, as with any idea of intellectual protection, is that its consequence is a closed shop of ideas. The history profession in Australia does possess a degree of diversity, but that is not necessarily the case with those engaged in Australian history.

Too often the agendas of the study of Australian history are driven by contemporary political concerns. Macintyre demonstrates this by his praise of Paul Keating and the Keating agenda in this book, and by his use of Keating to launch the book. In this he is following in the footsteps of Manning Clark who engaged in obsequious praise of Gough Whitlam. Keith Windschuttle has pointed out that contemporary political concerns have driven the study of Aboriginal history along roads designed to bolster those concerns. New Zealand political scientist Mark Francis has demonstrated that the history of Australian republicanism has been distorted by the need to prop up the case for an Australian republic.

The willingness of people like Macintyre to subordinate the quest for historical truth to contemporary politics is illustrated by Macintyre's view on oral history as evidence for Aboriginal history. Now we all know that memory can be a treacherous ally. There are people in Tasmania who 'remember' Merle Oberon growing up there even though the documents prove conclusively that she spent her youth in India. Such cases are not uncommon. Nevertheless Macintyre, like many of his compatriots, wants to make Aboriginal memory equivalent to the documentary records made by the officials of European Australia. He is happy...
that the National Museum has an exhibit on a massacre of Aboriginals that is reputed to have taken place in 1826 despite the lack of any documentary evidence. An oral tradition 180 years old should be good enough.

His defence of oral history leads him into making one particularly silly statement. Claiming that historians have always relied on memory he cites the speeches of Thucydides as an early example. Would we, he indignantly claims, reject Pericles' Funeral Oration on the grounds that it is 'uncorroborated by original documents'. It is a pity that Macintyre had not read Thucydides before making this claim. Thucydides makes it clear that he is not reporting his speeches verbatim but is recording what the speakers would and should have said. In fact some parts of his History, such as the Melian Dialogue, are probably made up. Thucydides is to be taken seriously not because he was taking shorthand notes at the speech but because as a member of the Athenian elite he understood the mindset that animated it. One only hopes that the intellectual arguments that Macintyre uses in training the next generation of Australian historians are higher in quality than this one.

At the end of the book Macintyre, following one assumes the good old traditions of academic life, accuses the History Warriors of obeying Rafferty's rules, caricaturing their opponents and impugning their motives and of being bullies. Of course Macintyre has not engaged in any such activity in writing this book.

The fact is that Macintyre is a long time participant in the History Wars; he is as much a 'Warrior' as those whose motives he impugns. In 1989 I responded to an earlier round of the History Wars that involved the Institute of Public Affairs and Macintyre by writing that it was wrong to see Australian history as either 'bad' or 'good'. History is made by complex people, people like ourselves, whose motives are often mixed and who can sometimes create tragedies without realising what they are doing. It is time that academic historians like Macintyre stopped using history as a means of demonstrating their moral superiority over us mere mortals and began to explore the complex humanity of those who came before us.

Reviewed by Greg Melleuish

Turning Off the Television: Broadcasting's Uncertain Future
by Jock Given
UNSW Press, 2003, Sydney, 328pp, $44.95
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Jock Given, one of Australia's foremost electronic communications academics, has produced an extraordinarily well-written book on digital broadcasting policy in Australia. Given, whose previous roles include a stint in the Australian federal bureaucracy and as Director of the University of New South Wales' Communications Law Centre, has a gift for telling a complex story in an easy-to-read and entertaining manner.

Turning Off the Television covers ground since Given's first book on broadcasting policy, published in 1998, which dealt with the initial policy decisions which eventually gave rise to Australia's highly convoluted and complex digital television legislation.

One of the things that makes Given's latest book so delightful to read is that it is structured so well, placing developments in digital broadcasting in domestic political and economic contexts both in Australia and overseas. Given starts by discussing the tech boom which created a number of young paper millionaires and the subsequent crash which destroyed their prospects of an adult lifetime of leisurely retirement.

The tech boom was important, because it showed how difficult it can be for companies to make money out of new technology—something not lost on media companies worldwide, including in Australia. And it was in the context of sour tech-sector investments, with which nearly all of Australia's large media players were involved, that Australia's digital broadcasting legislation was developed.

The book then time-warps back to the 1920s and progressively follows the history of broadcasting policy in Australia, the UK and the USA through to the 1990s when digital reception technologies became commercially available. In addition to this sweeping overview he effortlessly weaves in an easy-to-understand description of digital technology and the technical options which presented themselves to digital broadcasting policymakers.

As Given points out, digital broadcasting has the capacity to revolutionise the business models used by analogue free-to-air broadcasters and the relationship