Edited by
Anna Clark, Anne Rees
and Alecia Simmonds

Transnationalism, Nationalism and Australian History

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Editors
Anna Clark
University of Technology Sydney
Sydney, New South Wales
Australia

Anne Rees
La Trobe University
Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Alecia Simmonds
Faculty of Law
University of Technology Sydney
Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

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List of Contributors

Frank Bongiorno is Professor of History at the Australian National University and was previously Senior Lecturer in Australian History at King's College London. He is the author of *The Sex Lives of Australians: A History* (2012) and *The Eighties: The Decade That Transformed Australia* (2015), which was released in a paperback edition in 2017.

Leigh Boucher is a Senior Lecturer in Modern History at Macquarie University Sydney. He investigates the construction and representation of difference in liberal democratic political and popular cultures, in particular how questions of race, gender and sexuality organize citizenship rights and claims in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Australia.

Judith Brett is an Emeritus Professor of Politics at La Trobe University. She was editor of *Meanjin* from 1982 until 1986 and has written extensively for the media on Australian politics, including *The Age*, *The Australian*, *Arena* and *The Monthly*. She has published several books on the history of Australian non-labour politics, including *Robert Menzies Forgotten People* (Macmillan 1992) and *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class* (Cambridge 2003), as well as three quarterly essays. Her most recent book is a biography of Alfred Deakin, *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin* (Text 2017).

Anna Clark is an Australian Research Council Future Fellow and Director of the Australian Centre for Public History at the University of Technology Sydney. She writes on historiography, history education and historical consciousness.

Tanya Evans is a Senior Lecturer in Modern History and Director of the Centre for Applied History at Macquarie University. A public historian who specializes in the history of the family, motherhood, poverty and sexuality, Tanya is passionate about researching ordinary people and places in the past and co-creating historical knowledge with diverse communities.

Patricia Grimshaw is Emeritus Professor in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne, where she taught Australian and American history for several decades and contributed to the Women's/Gender Studies Programme. Her publications include *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand* (1972), *Paths of Duty: American Missionary Wives in Nineteenth Century Hawai'i* (1989), and the co-authored *Creating a Nation* (1994) and *Equal Subjects, Unequal Rights: Indigenous Peoples in Britain's Settler Societies 1830–1910* (2003).

Miranda Johnson is a lecturer in the Department of History, University of Sydney, where she teaches broadly in the areas of comparative Indigenous history, settler colonialism and decolonization. Her research centres on Indigenous history in North America and the Pacific and is particularly concerned with matters of rights, identity and agency.

Stuart Macintyre is a professorial fellow at the University of Melbourne. In 2015 he published *Australia's Boldest Experiment: War and Reconstruction in the 1940s*. His study of how Australian higher education was reconstructed in the 1980s and 1990s, *No End of a Lesson*, will appear late in 2017.

Anne Rees is a David Myers Research Fellow at La Trobe University. She is a historian of Australia in the world, and her current research examines Australian women's transpacific mobility and the impact of US interwar immigration restriction upon Anglospheric relations. Prior to joining La Trobe, Anne was a Kathleen Fitzpatrick Junior Research Fellow in the Laureate Research Program in International History at the University of Sydney.

Robert Reynolds is an Associate Professor in Modern History at Macquarie University and the author of three books on Australian gay life.

Alecia Simmonds is the Chancellor's Postdoctoral Fellow in the Faculty of Law at UTS, a lecturer in Pacific History at New York University-Sydney and the Book Review editor of *Law and History*. She is an interdisciplinary scholar whose work on Australian cultural history and the

relationship between emotion, imperialism and law in the Pacific has been published in a range of international and domestic journals. She is the author of the award-winning book *Wild Man: the story of a police shooting, mental illness and the law (*Affirm Press, 2015). Her current research project, *Courting Romance: Australian Stories of Love and Law*, uses breach of promise of marriage cases to examine the legal regulation of intimacy in Australia from 1788 to 1901.

Christina Twomey is Professor of History at Monash University. She is the author of *Deserted and Destitute: Motherhood, Wife Desertion and Colonial Welfare* (2002), *Australia's Forgotten Prisoners: Civilians Interned by the Japanese in World War Two* (2007) and, with co-author Mark Peel, *A History of Australia* (2011). Her next book, *The Battle Within: POWs in post-war Australia,* will appear in 2018. She is currently completing a study of the emergence of the concentration camp in the late nineteenth century.

Ian Tyrrell retired as Scientia Professor of History at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia in July 2012 and is now an Emeritus Professor of History. Born in Brisbane, Queensland, he was educated at the University of Queensland and Duke University, where he was a Fulbright Scholar and James B. Duke Fellow. His teaching and research interests include American history, environmental history and historiography.

CHAPTER 1

Testing the Boundaries: Reflections on Transnationalism in Australian History

Alecia Simmonds, Anne Rees, and Anna Clark

Transnational history in Australia is in an ebullient mood. Ten years after Marilyn Lake and Ann Curthoys' path-breaking work, *Connected Worlds*, there has been an entire generation of scholars raised on mantras of mobility, imperial circuitry and the need to think beyond national borders.[1] "Entangled histories" are the new orthodoxy, and circulation metaphors pepper the scholarly lexicon.[2] Within a remarkably short time, transnational history has moved from the margins to the mainstream. Only recently a radical critique of national historiographies, it is today among the most influential forms of history making.[3] In the wake of these developments, our conception of the Australian past – and the work of historical research and writing – has been transformed. No longer a quarantined field of study, Australian history now appears on the outer rim of Pacific and Indian Ocean studies, as a nodal point in British imperial studies and connected, or cast in a comparative light, with other settler colonial nations. The transnational has not only become a type

A. Simmonds • A. Clark (✉)
University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia

A. Rees
La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

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of counter-narrative to the nation, it has also helped complicate our understandings of national history.[4]

After first emerging in American historiography in the early 1990s, the "transnational turn" has since been embraced by scholars throughout the English-speaking world. European historians have also taken up *histoire croisée* and *Transfergeschichte*. Latin Americanists map the hybrid space of borderlands. The vogue for the transnational is very much a transnational phenomenon. But amid this international scholarship, especially in the United States, the mood is turning. The grand hopes that accompanied the early years of the transnational turn have given way to more measured reflection, as commentators assess the insights and shortcomings of the first generation of entangled histories. In Australia, by contrast, criticism of our new panoramic lenses has been muted or confined to suggestions for new directions: more non-Anglo-American sources, more linguistic diversity, less hagiography, more ocean-centred histories and more efforts to think about connections outside of European empires or nations.[5] Yet the methodological novelty of transnational history persists unquestioned. Amidst the rush to think and research outside the nation, the social conditions of transnational scholarship and its ontological privileging of particular historical processes have remained unchallenged in Australia.

This collection offers a moment to pause. We ask those who have quietly continued their nation-focused studies to speak up. We ask advocates of transnational history to reflect honestly on the personal and professional benefits and costs of a peripatetic research methodology. And we hope to open a critical and reflexive space to look back upon the past two decades and evaluate the promises, pitfalls and politics of transnational history. The first questions we might ask are: What's new? How has transnational history changed Australian national history? Has it opened up new sources and new analytical lenses in the manner of cultural or social history, or has it confined itself to a reinterpretation of old archives, a widening of old spatial boundaries? Is it, in the words of Matthew Pratt Guterl, "like a transparency laid over a familiar map"?[6]

Transnational history, as outlined by Curthoys and Lake, had modest aims: to allow for a study of "the ways in which past lives and events have been shaped by processes and relationships that have transcended the borders of nation states."[7] To date, the innovations have been mostly spatial: histories of migration and travel have illuminated the movement of convicts, missionaries, traders, immigrants, institutions and ideas across national borders. Digitisation has made our history bigger, allowing us to

conduct large-scale global surveys based on quantifiable data, but this has been achieved by rendering old archives more accessible rather than opening up new, fugitive archives. And digitisation also comes with pitfalls of its own, not least of which is the loss of the "place-specific learning" once built into the research process. In the absence of what Lara Putnam terms "real-world friction," even experienced researchers can too easily make "rookie mistakes."[8]

Meanwhile, national time lies undisturbed. The geographic ambition of the new transnational histories has not yet occasioned an accompanying temporal shift in historiography (beyond environmental and archaeological approaches).[9] Our basic modes of periodisation – from pre-contact Indigenous history to colonial history, Federation-era, interwar and postwar – for the most part remain bound to and determined by the nation. The space of Australian history has exploded; its time, as in other national contexts, is little changed. Where have we linked our new understandings of Australia's place in the world to global temporalities? What new "temporal plot points" might our transnational scholarship generate?[10]

We may also query the social conditions of our own historical productions, to historicise our practice in the present. To what extent is our fascination with a borderless past inhabited by mobile subjects a product of our own privileged cosmopolitanism? Observers of the field note a phalanx of first-world academics, flying on the wings of generous research grants, swooping and feasting on global archives.[11] More disconcertingly, to what extent is this creating a "professional standard" that could not be met by anyone without tenure or institutional support? Digitisation goes some way to defraying travel costs, but only if your sources come from a country wealthy enough to digitise their archives. For all its subversive rhetoric, the practice of transnational history typically rests on economic, racial and institutional privilege that leaves non-Western histories and historians behind. The scope of our scholarship has been enlarged to encompass more diverse peoples and places, but in a manner that arguably reinscribes the dominance of metropolitan voices. Far from "provincializing" the West, the time and cost of transnational scholarship risks making this an approach that further concentrates historical production in the hands of a privileged elite.[12]

We may also ask to what extent our conceptual frames and vocabularies are indebted to present-day economies. Are we not disturbed to find that the very metaphors that we draw upon to frame transnational histories are the same we find in neo-liberal justifications for globalisation: free flows

and circuits of people and goods across national borders unperturbed by the state? Historians of capitalism remind us that our "connectivity talk" mirrors – even naturalises – the borderless world envisaged by Wall Street and Silicon Valley, and easily elides the violence and inequality of connection.[13] As Paul A. Kramer cautions, our "exuberant cosmopolitan fantasies of a mobile, interconnected world" can, at their worst, "provide present-day neoliberal globalism with a useable past."[14] No longer handmaidens to the nation-state, are we now courtiers to late capitalism?

In the Australian context, we can further discern a stark re-inscription of anxious colonial relationships to the metropole. We unearth those areas of our history that will most please a global (read American or British) audience and forsake our own local audiences. Of course, this is encouraged by university administrations that too often base their rankings on fantasies of international prestige and connection at the expense of local impact. Although publishers still favour national stories, we strive to grace the pages of international journals and present at international conferences, and shape our research accordingly.[15] This quest to be heard in London or New York is all too familiar, strikingly reminiscent of nineteenth- and twentieth-century antipodean efforts to win validation from West End audiences, Fleet Street publishers or Oxford dons. In our twentieth-first-century attempts to "stand up in the great world" – a phrase coined by poet Mary Gilmore in 1928 – we can see the latest incarnation of a time-honoured Australian tradition.[16] But are we now confident global citizens, raising our voices in an international conversation, or are we still playing the part of adolescent nation, ever seeking the approval of our betters abroad?

And irrespective of the nature of this international orientation, it turns us away from domestic publics. When we project our voices outward, we create a local vacuum that risks being filled by the same chauvinist narratives that transnational history was created to displace. Speaking of the British context, Alison Twells chastises her globally inclined peers for neglecting national audiences and thereby allowing masculinist national histories to persist in the public sphere. "[W]e have lost our way," Twells laments, and forsaken the "radical and democratic aims" that underpinned the original critique of national historiographies.[17] Can the same be said of Australia, where bestseller lists contain few works of scholarly history, and even fewer that contain transnational content? In an age of fast revivifying national chauvinism, these are far from idle concerns.

Beyond the politics of transnational scholarly practice, the historiographical preference for supranational subjects contains a politics of its own. What gets lost when we privilege historical processes that are self-evidently global? With its focus on exploration, trade, migrants and travellers, transnational history contains little space for the sedentary majority. In the rush to re-discover the flow of people and things, the static and the vernacular are de-prioritised. When connection and mobility are the catchwords *du jour*, their opposites are too easily cast aside. Again, these hierarchies militate against a more inclusive vision of the past. Although recent Australian scholarship has tracked the movement of Indigenous peoples, Indian hawkers and professional women, the search for history's mobile subjects will most reliably favour the white men whose gender and race conferred the freedom to leave home and cross borders at will.[18] Their predominance in the transnational archive is especially stark in the nineteenth century, when the large majority of women were condemned to stasis by the labour of care while poverty often condemned men to mobility. Within a historiographical climate oriented towards global networks, the proverbial "woman from Queensland" who "spent her life working in pubs and shops" will, as Christina Twomey notes in her chapter, yet again struggle to win a place in the spotlight.

Other victims of our transnational preoccupations may include individual agency and local context. When we zoom out to a regional, oceanic or global scale, can we hold true to the specificities of people and place? To what extent does a bigger canvas necessitate broader strokes? To date, biography has been the favoured solution to this dilemma, the easiest and seemingly most effective means to preserve the micro-scale of individual lives and their immediate contexts within the magnified field of transnational scholarship. The study of "transnational lives" is a booming industry, both within Australia and overseas, with local publications such as the 2010 edited collection *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity* cited as international exemplars of the field.[19] At its best, this practice can, as Linda Colley writes, chart "a world in a life and a life in a world," and "tack between the individual and world histories 'in such a way as to bring them into simultaneous view'."[20] Yet the problem with transnational biography is that it highlights anomalous lives: the global elites or rare miscellaneous wanderers who were more mobile than most and, crucially, left records of their travels. For every non-elite global citizen such as Colley's Elizabeth Marsh – or, to cite a local example, Fiona Paisley's "lone protestor," A. M. Fernando – there are thousands

more who never ventured beyond national borders.[21] How might these "ordinary" masses be incorporated into transnational history?

Ann McGrath's award-winning new study of interracial marriage presents one route forward, with its insistence that transnational crossings also occurred between "coloniser nations" and "First Nations" co-located within the bounds of a single nation-state. By fixing her gaze on what she terms the "colonising transnational," McGrath is able to write transnational biographies of Indigenous women whose mobility was more mental than physical.[22] Also promising are projects that delineate the transnational constitution of domesticated lives and communities, such as Jon Piccini's research into the "worlding" of 1960s Australian radicals.[23] Such scholarship points to the possibilities of transnational approaches: the urgent movement of ideas – such as democracy, radical Islam, Indigenous and civil rights, peace, environmentalism; the need to see historical subjectivity without, as well as within, national borders; and the potential to recast seemingly national "moments" in global contexts.

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Like many Australian historians, we have found ourselves increasingly pondering the limits and boundaries of national history in this age of transnationalism. But we realised we could not represent that diversity of historiographical accounts and reflections on our own. The inspiration for this collection comes from an Academy of Social Sciences in Australia Workshop, held in 2015, which explored the place of transnational histories in Australian historiography and historical practice. Given the powerful challenge in recent years to the "national narrative" by transnational and international historical perspectives, the workshop presented an opportunity to examine the discipline of Australian history in light of these critical new approaches. Transnational histories have sought to break down simplistic distinctions between "global," "world" and "national" histories by showing that global forces (networks, ideas, institutions, processes) do not simply "transcend" nation-states, they also create them. Transnational history is preoccupied with highlighting the instability and historical contingency of the modern political terms we often take for granted, such as "nation-state" and "national community."

Key moments in Australian history, such as colonisation, Eureka, federation, Australians at war and the recognition of Indigenous rights, have been increasingly re-examined with a transnational lens, raising important questions about the unique context of Australia's national narrative.

Meanwhile, the pervasiveness of the "Australian story" reveals the enduring resonance of the nation in public historical discourse and scholarship. The so-called history wars, including contests over the national history curriculum, museum exhibits and national commemorations, continue to generate heated discussion around the country. Popular history books drawing on explicitly national stories such as Anzac, Kokoda and Eureka are consumed avidly by an Australian readership, as are heritage tours, Australian historical fiction and television. These popular expressions of Australia's past demonstrate that people around the country – not just historians, public commentators and politicians – care deeply about, and connect to, historical narratives that are explicitly national.

In response, we hope this collection offers an examination of the tension between these national and transnational perspectives today: we recognise the critical need to internationalise the often parochial nation-based narratives that characterise the history wars, for example, or the glorification of the Anzac Legend; and we are similarly drawn to study the mobility of lives and ideas as ways to break out the apparent teleology of "the national story." But we also sense the limits of transnational histories in Australia, where histories are primarily produced for a national audience, where a strong national discourse resonates powerfully in public debate, and where those very mobilities can overlook the vernacular and intimate in everyday Australian life. The "nation" remains the central framework of historical discussion for good reason.

At a time when Australian history seems to be moving in two distinct directions, this collection brings these diverging national and transnational approaches together for a timely consideration. Leading scholars and commentators from around the country reflect on their historical practice, and ask several critical research questions: What are the implications of transnational and international approaches for Australian history? What possibilities do they bring to the discipline? And, significantly, what are their limitations?

As a way into some of these questions, the collection is structured in three parts that move from the global to the local and personal. The first encompasses comparative and international research, drawing on the experiences of eminent researchers working across nations and communities. What is transnational history? How do new transnational readings of the past challenge conventional national narratives and approaches? Ian Tyrrell, Miranda Johnson, Anne Rees and Patricia Grimshaw turn the lens to their own work and tease out some of the implications of reading Australian history using a transnational approach.

These chapters centre on the themes of environmental history, Indigenous histories and women's history, which have been central to the development and distinctiveness of transnational histories. Each demonstrates the capacity of the transnational turn to develop new material, interpretations and approaches to Australian history. For example, both Rees and Johnson explore the concept of mobility – actual, as well as intellectual, political and ideological – to present new understandings of Australian women's and Indigenous history. Yet these authors also negotiate that constant creative tension between the potential of transnational approaches to recast national narratives and the need for those same narratives to contextualise and ground the transnational.

Patricia Grimshaw documents the transnational influences in feminist historical scholarship in Australia, and argues that feminist historians' "deployment of transnational frameworks empowered Australian women's historians to intervene profoundly in the national historiography: their work was transnational in inspiration, national in its focus, substance and impact." While it "would be an exaggeration perhaps to claim that the first practitioners and those who followed displaced central understandings of Australia's past," she continues, "we can have no doubt that they offered a robust counter narrative." That potential for transnational methods to provide the groundwork for counter-narratives to national historiographies echoes the work of Tracey Banivanua Mar and Penny Edmonds, who recognise the importance of understanding the local specificities and transnational structures of settler-colonialism, for example, and whose work has substantially influenced the conceptualisation of this collection.[24]

That does not mean the national disappears in transnational analysis; far from it. As Ian Tyrrell has famously asked, "How can the nation-state be incorporated into this project" of transnational history, since much "history is still written in terms that accept the primacy of the national focus?"[25] Using environmental histories of the Cooks River in Sydney and Los Angeles River in the US, Tyrrell expands his thesis in this collection, and shows that while "place can be transnationally conceived, constructed, and transmitted," these "transnational elements of place-making are shaped and limited by the particularities of the physical environment and the succession of cultural landscapes modifications undertaken." In other words, place is imagined and inscribed locally as well as utilised as a transnational concept.

Part II includes commentary on the enduring role of the nation in national historiography. How do we write national histories that are

attentive to global influences? What does the nation look like after the transnational turn? If Bongiorno, Macintyre, Brett and Twomey are any indication, then we must conclude that Australian histories are now irrevocably transnational. To paraphrase Bongiorno, the nation is revealed to be contingent and artificial, embedded in and shaped by cosmopolitan networks. All four scholars are committed to writing specifically Australian history, which requires that they adopt scholarly lenses that allow them to peer beyond national borders. For Bongiorno, reflecting on his recent book, *The Eighties*, Labor's shift to economic rationalism or a more market-oriented policy can only be understood as a product of global forces meeting a specific Australian context. Twomey traces the provenance of Australian ideas about the "protection" of Indigenous people to the management of slaves and other non-citizen, non-criminal groups by European empires beginning in the sixteenth century. Macintyre finds that Australian post-war reconstruction consisted of an eclectic range of policies that were pursued through diplomacy and international organisations but enacted and applied by national governments. And the figure of Alfred Deakin makes little sense to his most recent biographer, Judith Brett, without attending to the international, particularly American, influences which shaped him and how he saw his life.

Yet acknowledging transnational influences does not mean writing transnational history. One of the key differences that Bongiorno and Brett identify is the question of audience, as Brett asks, "who is our imagined readership and where do we publish?" Keen to overcome the problem of historians' lack of public engagement and their usurpation by journalists, Brett exhorts at least "some of us [to] write primarily for our fellow citizens" rather than international journals, which means crafting narratives that are more likely to challenge or appeal to readers with local knowledge. While writing nation-focused history may win historians a wider audience, it will also quite possibly lose younger historians a job or impede career progression, as Twomey, Bongiorno and Brett all lament. Twomey argues that transnational history became a particularly attractive option as academics felt increasing institutional pressure by universities keen to improve their rankings to internationalise scholarship, which meant publishing in international journals and publishing with international presses at the expense of local readers. Bongiorno suggests that the peculiarly privileged position of academics as mobile, cosmopolitan elites may also explain the ease with which we all put on our transnational lenses. While all authors recognise that the new sources and new questions