

1. An occasional newsletter of the History Program, RSSH

American reflections

Ann Curthoys, currently a Visiting Fellow in the History Program, recalls her recent appointment in Washington.

In August 2003, I arrived (with my husband, John Docker) in Washington DC to take up my appointment as the third G08 Professor of Australian Studies at Georgetown University. We lived in an extremely pleasant apartment in R Street, Georgetown, for nine months, returning home via London and Scotland. It was a most interesting time, and I felt I learnt a lot about American society very quickly. I liked some of what I saw, such as the diversity and activity and feeling of endless possibility in such a large society, and didn't like other aspects, most notably the high levels of racial segregation that seems to permeate American life, the mass media, the general sense of self-absorption, the Puritanism, the strength of a particularly unpleasant brand of fundamentalist Christianity, and the lack of humour and irony in so much of day to day contact. I realized my picture of American society to that point had been largely drawn from Hollywood movies, and found it continually puzzling how little correspondence there was between the lively rudeness and humour in so much American film and the endless maddening politeness and literal-mindedness that characterized so many Americans I met. Not all, of course, and I made some good friends while there, both American and non-American, who together have broadened my sense of being-in-the-world, which I think will stay with me for a long time to come. (I am, I think, less puzzled by George W. Bush's re-election for a second term than I might have been otherwise.)

Some details. I taught three undergraduate courses, one in Fall 2003 entitled *The Sixties in Australia and the United States*, and two in Spring 2004, one *Migration in Australian History* and the other *Gender and Sexuality in Australian History*. In these three courses I taught a total of 25 students, one Australian and 24 American. The Sixties course dealt with the civil rights movements, domestic debates over the Vietnam War, and the emergence of 'second wave' feminism in the two societies. The most lively discussion in class was over the role of the media in the Vietnam War in both Australia and the US, with events in Iraq forming a backdrop to the discussion. To my surprise, given that nine of the ten students were male, the most successful part of the course overall, dealt with the Australian women's movement. In the *Migration* course, I had quite a number of students interested in coming to Australia as part of their Study Abroad program, and they were in the class to earn points which would increase their chances of being selected. At times, I became something of a tourist guide, being asked questions about drinking laws, beaches, and snakes; I would fairly religiously try to relate these to our theme, Migration. Some excellent essays were written on American migration to Australia, and many other subjects. The *Gender and Sexuality in Australian History* course was for Senior students only, and was therefore small, with six

students. The standard of work produced, on topics ranging from 'First Wave Feminism and Aboriginal Women' to 'Alcohol in Aboriginal Communities', 'Gender Representations in *The Bulletin* 1880 – 1900', and 'Eugenics and Aboriginal Child Removal Policies' was very high. All in all, I enjoyed teaching at Georgetown, though it took time to recover from my surprise at how different most of the students were from what I had expected: they were extremely hard working, polite, and deferential. The most rewarding aspect was to see the rapid rise in the quality of their work, and of their understanding of Australian culture and history, from their first assignment to their last.

Teaching was only part of my duties, and my life, during my time in Washington DC. As a visitor, I spent a lot of time just soaking up American media, people, institutions, and ideas. We traveled around the DC area and beyond, to Harper's Ferry, Monticello (Jefferson's house), Frederick Douglass's house, and to a number of museums and interesting places in nearby Baltimore and Philadelphia. Further afield, we visited Florida, Ohio, South Carolina, New York, Connecticut, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia, not to mention a wonderful visit to Hawaii on the way to DC. In Washington itself, John and I walked frequently down to the Potomac River, or caught a bus to the Mall, visiting institutions such as the American Museum of History, the National Gallery of Art, the Vietnam Memorial, the Lincoln Monument, the Gallery of African Art, the Holocaust Museum, and much else. I had the pleasure of attending at the American History museum an event celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the March on Washington on 28 September 2003 – hearing John Lewis, one of the original speakers, some of the singers of the sixties period, and listening to a variety of speeches. At the end we all sang 'We Shall Overcome', holding hands (the audience was largely though not entirely African American) – quite amazing. I heard many other speakers over the nine months I spent in Washington, including the poet Derek Walcott, the political scientist Samantha Power, and the noted historian of Israel and Palestine, Avi Shlaim.

One advantage of living in Washington was the number of conferences held there. For the price of the conference fee and a bus fare, I attended the American Oral History Conference in October, the American Legal History Conference in November, and the American Historical Association Annual Meeting in January 2004. All three were extremely exciting and challenging, especially the Legal History conference with its strengths in civil rights movement histories, and international law and history. Another advantage of living in Washington was being able to play host to the considerable number of Australian academics who pass through, including our own Ann McGrath. Yet another advantage was being able to attend the huge march for women's reproductive rights in April 2004, which brought a million people to Washington to protest against the continued erosion of women's right to abortion. We marched through the streets of Washington

and then sat in the Mall, watching and listening to the speakers on huge screens – Whoopi Goldberg, Julianne Moore, Ashley Judd, Gloria Steinem, Madeleine Albright, and many many more.

I also delivered many talks myself, on the Freedom Ride (at Georgetown, the University of Maryland, Case Western Reserve University, and Wofford College in South Carolina), and on the Australian History Wars (at the University of Texas, the Australian and New Zealand Studies Association of North America annual conference in Toronto, and at McGill University, in Montreal). I especially loved Montreal as a city, and the graduate students and young academics in History at McGill, and would love to go there again some day. My main research activities were in relation to the work of Raphael Lemkin, the international jurist who coined the term ‘genocide’ in 1944, especially as it related to Australian history. This meant a research trip to New York, to the Jewish Historical Society Library and the New York Public Library, at both of which I found material of great interest to Australian scholars of genocide, plus working also at the Library of Congress. In addition, I wrote a number of essays, including one on ‘Genocide in Tasmania: The History of an Idea’ for a collection edited by Dirk Moses, and an introduction to Lemkin’s unpublished chapter on Tasmania for a special issue of *Patterns of Prejudice*. I also edited and compiled a report on ‘Australian Studies in the US’ for *Crossings*, the journal of the International Australian Studies Association, which is available online at <http://asc.uq.edu.au/crossings>.

It’s impossible to summarise a long visit with such contradictory experiences and impressions. The biggest disappointment, I think, was that while I met many academics with interests close to mine while in the US I found it virtually impossible to meet anyone (with a couple of exceptions) in the History Department at Georgetown – there were few open events to attend, their seminar series was short and peculiarly uninspiring, and everyone just seemed very busy and preoccupied. Yet the chance to live for almost a year in the US was absolutely invaluable, and I am grateful to both the G08 and Georgetown University itself for making that possible. When people ask me how it was, I always say ‘good’ or ‘very good’, or ‘interesting’ or even ‘exciting’. I always say, though, how especially good it is to be back.

Returning from a Big Nation to a Little Nation

Tim Rouse reflects on his year as Visiting Professor of Australian Studies at Harvard.

American students are well-versed in a generalised multicultural liberalism that allows them to make sense of any national history that is cast in majority culture/minority culture terms. Perhaps my students knew less than they thought they knew about Australia. When I showed them TV footage of contemporary Aborigines, they were frankly dismayed as they adjusted their ‘Aboriginal imaginary’ to fit the stylishly clad and well-groomed persons on screen. I had to point out which of those in the televised discussion panel were Indigenous.

One student, with whom I shared a sympathetic interest in the problems facing Palestine, sent me an email praising

my ‘principle’ and even ‘courage’ for including Israel among the settler-colonial societies with which Australia should be compared. American liberals are generally wary of saying anything that might be taken as anti-semitic. To mention that Zionism is an ideology of colonisation is to raise a subject that is too sensitive (as one of my Jewish students acknowledged) for candid discussion. As I had been warned by reading Edward Said, the degree of consensus on the Israel-US alliance is striking. Kerry professes to respect that alliance as deeply as Bush. The emotional polarity of their contest belied the candidates’ essential similarities on Middle East (and many other) policies.

When I returned to Australia, I found that the participation of the US Embassy in Australia’s domestic politics had become normalised. Journalists were framing Ambassador Schlieffer’s critical comments on the Labor Party not as a breach of a convention of ‘sovereignty’ but as an index of Latham’s skill in handling the US relationship. Latham, in turn, had worked out what he had to do if he were to be judged as handling it right. In that atmosphere of nudging intimidation, the Labor Party made only a token critique of a ‘Free Trade Agreement’ that is less about trade than about the legal privileging of US corporations and the weakening of Australia’s public sector.

In lectures on twentieth century Latin American history that I audited at Harvard, Jack Womack argued that the US Embassy should be considered a *domestic* institution in post world war two Latin America. No significant intra-elite manoeuvre escaped its interest or influence. As some of our colleagues (Ross Garnaut, Peter Drahos) have recently warned us, Australia risks much in its current movement into diplomatic and legal intimacy with the United States. Our political elite, whether out of conviction or nervous ‘prudence’, offered us as little political choice – in this matter, at least – as faced the hapless US voter with an interest in the Iraq war.

I see the History Program’s recent acceptance of funding from the US Embassy in the light of this larger process of hegemonic extension. A gift without strings ennoble the donor, and thus does its own small political service to the normalisation of an Australian American friendship that – more than ever – should be the object of our most stringent scepticism.

Recent awards for History Program members

Rebe Taylor has won the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for a First Book of History (\$15,000) for her *Unearthed: The Aboriginal Tasmanians of Kangaroo Island* (Wakefield Press, 2003). The book, which is based on the thesis Rebe completed in RSSS, was also awarded the Adelaide Festival Non-Fiction Award earlier in 2004.

Graeme Davison, an Adjunct Professor in the School based in the History Program, was awarded the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for Non-Fiction (\$30,000) for his book *Car Wars: How the car won our hearts and conquered our cities* (Allen & Unwin, 2003).

Tom Griffiths was historical consultant to an ABC Online Documentary on the Black Friday 1939 Bushfires which won the 2004 Australian Teachers of Media Award for the Best Educational Website.