

Professional History Practice and The local Philosophy Café

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PROFESSIONAL HISTORY PRACTICE: THE LOCAL PHILOSOPHY CAFÉ



This month, PHA Qld member Dr Neville Buch presents an [article](#) on his recent and ongoing work in history and philosophy education. For further details about this project, or to learn more about the group's next meetup on 14 April, please contact [Neville](#) or visit [The Philosophy Cafe Meetup](#).

After many decades since completing my history doctorate, I have finally returned to history teaching. Of course, it is not a paid contract, as we have to expect in these terrible years of higher education poverty in Australia. There is a hunger out in the broad community for humanities education, and I am very much not alone in being a higher degree graduate who, in various organisational forums, are teaching for without payment, what would have been once paid to teach university students. Someone is lying in the universities when they say there is no student demand for broad humanities courses. The evidence to the contrary is out there in the real world.

So the story here is important, to demonstrate that the skills taught in professional history practice at universities are still very much needed in communities across Australia. For several years the Brisbane Meet-Up group, 'The Philosophy Café' has been running. For those unfamiliar with this latest online phenomenon, the 'Meet Up' website and business model aims to take people back to a face-to-face-off-screen experience while utilizing the advantages of the online technology. So, it is a cross between a digital meeting schedule for real-world events and online discussion platform. Brisbane's Meet-Up 'The Philosophy Café' had originally organised by threesome of a café owner, a philosopher from the University of Queensland and an educationalist from the Queensland University of Technology. The community work was proving time-consuming for the paid academics and the café owner was facing a few challenges in the business, whereby the meet-up could not continue at the café.

At this stage, at the end of 2018, a colleague of my mine – another underemployed professional, a English teacher who ran the Brisbane Meet-Up 'Classic Books' – decided to take ownership of 'The Philosophy Café', with the agreement of the former owner. In the 'Meet-Up' business model, a new group owner has to pay annually a couple of hundreds of dollars for the privilege. I agreed to come on-board as a joint-administrator and we organised monthly meetings at a café in Stones Corner. After a few months, my friend handed over the whole organisation of the group over to me. I came up with a seven month teaching program which combined prepared pre-meeting reading lists and materials with a lightly-facilitated group monthly discussion. Hence, there was a putting-together of a learning experience and an open forum to airing considered opinions and genuine questions. I will admit that the first few meet ups have not gone perfectly but there is a strong goodwill among the participants and my teaching practise is improving. The great challenge is balancing the teacher's input for learning and group self-inquiry for learning. I am encouraged in the development of the program. Participants still ask for my summary at the beginning of the meet up, even though I have put up summaries for each meeting on the website. And for my part, I am increasingly becoming shorter in the time taken in my mini-lectures. Even though, participants have been wanting, and were comfortable with 15 minutes, I am more comfortable in getting the opening mini-lecture down to five minutes.

The seven month program at 'The Philosophy Café' draws upon my professional history experience within my expertise of philosophic history and socio-intellectual history. A key text for the program is Stephen Trombley's *A Short History of Western Thought* (W. F. Howes Limited, 2012). Each meet-up is like Trombley's sweeping history, taking a few centuries of philosophy thought, especially in the first couple of epochs which are huge waves of time. It is 'Big History' but on a small scale than the current trend for evolutionary and planetary histories. I have made one variation to general curriculum approach, one exceptional turn for the April Meet-Up. Generally, the program is looking at seven very sweeping epochs of historical time for 'the West', but with a strong interest in the 'East-West' cultural interface inside the philosophies. There is also a focus on how the intellectual

past histories are important to the present and its various ways of thinking. The exceptional April meet up is looking at the fourth epoch of 'Age of Revolution and Nationalism'; a slightly reductive approach has been taken, focusing on the philosophical influences in Australian history. The seven month program started with a pre-program trial meet-up in December 2018 on the topic of 'Aristotle and the Roots of Philosophies in the Ancient World', and continued with:

1. January, 'Our Present and Philosophies of the High Medieval Period (1000-1250), and Early Modern (1453-1706)';
2. February, 'Our Present and Philosophies in the [Western] Age of Enlightenment (1715-1789)';
3. March, 'Our Present and Philosophies in the Counter-Reformation (1545-1648), Counter-Enlightenment (20th century re-reading; 1725-1797), [Continental-British-American] Romanticism (1800-1850)';
4. April, 'Our Present and Philosophies in the [European and 'New World'] Age of Revolution and Nationalism (1774-1865)';
5. May, 'Our Present and Philosophies in the [European] Age of the New Imperialism and the Evolution of Globalization (1884-1919)';
6. June, 'Our Present and Philosophies in the Age of the New Militarism, International Peace, New Nationalism, Multi-Culturalism, Persons, and the Crisis of Humanity (1870-2000)': PART 1 -- Cosmopolitanism, Prussianism, Britannia-ism, New Internationalisms, Multilateralism, Commonwealth of Nations, Hyper-Nationalism (Progressivist);
7. July, 'Our Present and Philosophies in the Age of the New Militarism, International Peace, New Nationalism, Multi-Culturalism, Persons, and the Crisis of Humanity (1870-2000)': PART 2 -- Hyper-Nationalism (Fascist, Social Darwinism and National Socialist), Cultural Pluralism and Critical Thinking, Phenomenology, Existentialism, Personhood, Modern Humanism and its 'Post-Modern' Critics.

For this audience, the April meet-up in the teaching program has a great significance, so I will explain the 'lesson plan' as I have sent out the introductory summary on the web page for the April meet-up. The April Meet-Up on the 'Age of Revolution' will have a unique Australian flavour and a distinctive approach in focusing on the writing of one philosophic historian, who well summed up 'Age of Revolution' in its three major groupings of philosophical thought, not only for this period but for 'Australia's writ large', as Mark McKenna, Manning Clark's biographer, puts it. His writing not only reveals the philosophical underpinnings in our history, it also maps out the major Australian cultural themes.

First, the *mea culpa*, for a historian who introduced into Australian historiography the idea of the fatal flaw; on the Left, Clark was criticized for an outdated anthropology, in using the terms of 'Stone Age' and 'primitive' in relation to the culture of Aboriginal people. However, it must be noted, and it has been acknowledged by historians, that Clark never used such

terms to denigrate Aboriginal history, communities or persons; in fact, for the era when Clark was writing (1950s and 1960s), the opposite observation is true. He was one of the white intellectual leaders of the time who advocated Aboriginal self-development, even as he saw European education and ideas as influencing that forward-movement of indigenous culture; and many Aboriginal historians and political leaders today would agree to that modern progressivist view.

On the Right, there is a very minority view which criticizes Clark for his soft left-wing views of Soviet Communism. These criticisms extend from three controversies. In 1960 Clark published 'Meeting Soviet Man' about his literary group tour of the Soviet Union. It is one of Clark's poorer books because of the ideological frame in Clark's naive polemics against the same type of naive polemics from rabid anti-communists of these years. One of these polemicists was Malcolm Ellis, who was otherwise a fairly respectable biographer and historian. Unfortunately, as in parallel to Clark's soft views of the Soviet Union, Ellis' ultra-conservative views distorted his history writing. And Clark and Ellis were the great protagonists against each other in the debates of 19th century colonial history. Although there are respectable conservative historians who will continue to defend Ellis, the clear consensus is that Clark was the better historian, and better for his substantial philosophical insight, which Australian historians like Ellis gravely lacked. However, one has to clarify that Ellis also brought empirical criticisms upon Clark's works, above his political bias. For a more considered discussion on the Ellis-Clark relationship, see Andrew Moore's [article](#). My own philosophical conclusion is Ellis' naïve empiricism is deeply linked into his political severe dislike of Clark's history.

The Courier Mail had the third, 'storm-in-teacup', controversy in 1996. Clark had allegedly and secretly been awarded a Soviet Union metal ('Order of Lenin'), I assume for the book and literary trip, and 'The Courier Mail', like something out of the early 1950s, went on a witch-hunt in populist conspiracy madness (even as the truth of the allegation is unproven, the allegation itself proves nothing of substance). Derek Barry, a Queensland-based blogger, has a very good [article](#) on the disgraceful chapter in Queensland journalism. All of the motivation of 'The Courier Mail' was political, in the same vein of Malcolm Ellis, who is a hero to these uneducated journalists and editors. And I can say 'uneducated', as I recall no Queensland educated historian who would support 'The Courier Mail', and the rag was roundly condemned by leading Australian historians. Among technical Centralists – in other words among historians whose criticisms of Clark are not political in nature – but criticises Clark – and rightly so – for research errors across his voluminous histories. These errors are numerous but across a very large body of work, and importantly, the research errors are to do with misidentifications of minor person, places, and events which do not affect the argument of his writing. The later editions of his histories have been edited to remove these errors or end-noted clearly the references as errors.

Clark's work still stands today as the best generalised histories of Australian cultural beliefs and doubts, against all criticisms of a few out-dated terms, his political bias, and the technical errors of research which have been identified. With the *mea culpa* out of the way, we can proceed to explain why Clark is so informative on 'the Age of Revolution' for Australians. Mark McKenna is an excellent historian, and as Clark's chief biographer quoting McKenna is the best way to get a key statement on Clark's illumination of what 'the Age of Revolution' was for Australians, and why it is important:

'Clark's idiosyncratic, sprawling ode to Australian character and place in *A History of Australia* not only romanticised Australia's past, for the first time it gave it an epic dimension. The scale of his undertaking was itself an attempt to see Australia as a unique site for the transplanting of European civilisation. ...'

Continuing McKenna's quote, and note that the biographer is not above criticising his beloved subject, as Clark was willing himself to be self-critical:

'...Clark's grand narrative—with its now familiar, but at the time quite revolutionary schema of seeing Australia's past through the prism of three great belief systems (Protestantism, Catholicism, and the Enlightenment)—lurches from the inspired to the droll; finding tragedy, pathos, and existential crisis on every stump and street corner. Part Gibbon, Macaulay, and Carlyle, and steeped in the language of the Old Testament, it is entirely character driven, mostly by a succession of flawed, tormented males, who walk on stage at the allotted time to play out the drama of their biographical roles.'

McKenna goes on to discuss Clark's prism of '...the inner life of his characters. But his feeling was not only for character, it was also for place'. Here is why Clark's histories, in relation to 'the Age of Revolution', is so important – he successfully pulls together lived persons, the great current challenge in understanding the concept of 'identity', with the philosophic themes for historical exploration: individualism, collectivism, economic competition, race mythology and the socio-economic 'survival of the fittest', liberalism, socialism, religious traditions, tragedy, and even Kant's 'crooked timber'. It is Clark's histories that stop in its tracks the un-thinking of popular family and heritage history advocates in Australia, who are currently reducing histories to the impoverished worship of material objects and ancestry. Much of the impoverished histories come from naïve empiricism (perhaps, to give its political edge, 'naïve imperialism').

These are my own introductory views of how Manning Clark's histories informed Australians how the 'Age of Revolution' reshaped 'the Australian culture' from within. Even if we would conclude that the one grand narrative does not exist as a history, nevertheless, the plurality of the schemas in Clark's work reveal the national narrative placed together, the story we construct for ourselves, and in that sense the history exists. I encourage you to read the McKenna entry in the [Australian Dictionary of Biography](#).

This is the conclusion of the introductory summary for the April meet-up on 'the Age of Revolution and Nationalism'. Hopefully, then in seeing the importance of these 'lesson plans' the argument is well-grounded, not only that there is a groundswell for adult and

community education for the higher learning of the humanities, but that political forces in this country are robbing its own citizens of the capacity to obtain a fair, just, and intelligent nationalism. And if governments keep impoverishing its citizens from the lack of universities providing broad humanities courses, due to the destructive skewing of higher education funding, they risk a destructive revolution falling on their government heads. These policies have real-world fall-outs for those who have had to suffer the consequence of government decisions in higher education. And we have seen from history, revolutions are times of 'payback', and they were plotted in the philosophy salons.



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