

**FULL LECTURE THEATRES IN A TWILIGHT ZONE?
TEACHING UNITED STATES HISTORY FROM AUSTRALIA:
INSTITUTIONAL AND CULTURAL IMPEDIMENTS AND
OPPORTUNITIES**

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I want to begin by using the recent report to the AHA Executive by Carly Millar and Mark Peel to talk about the current position of US history within Australian university teaching. I want then to discuss the ways in which US history might continue as a vital part of Australian university teaching offerings and research activities, and to canvass some of the impediments that many Australian teachers and researchers of the US face. I hope to explore issues such as the future of American studies programs and the different ways in which small and large universities can teach US history at both undergraduate and graduate levels.¹

1. The place of US history within Australian university History teaching

Millar and Peel's survey shows that US history occupies a very strong position within the teaching of non-Australian histories in most universities across the continent. In terms of second/third year courses, US history is taught in 33 out of 44 Australian programs - including all of the GO8 universities and in 27 other institutions as geographically, pedagogically and size diverse as Flinders, Murdoch, Notre Dame, University of Southern Queensland, Monash and ADFA. The proportion of universities teaching US history as found by Millar and Peel - 75% - is almost identical to that found by Etherington et al in 1995 - 76.5%.²

Millar and Peel's findings place US history in a group of specialities, comprised of US, Modern European and Asian histories, which fall in a cluster below Australian history as the most taught history field in Australia. Australian history of course dominates, being taught in 43 programs, with Modern European taught in 34, and US and Asian in 33. There is then a wide gap to Modern British (20), Medieval (20), Theory (22), Women/Gender/Feminism (24), Public History (22) and War & Society (22) in a third group.³ Of special interest in terms of Millar and Peel's commentary at the beginning of their paper is the relative strength of US history (in 34 programs) to that of Modern British (20) -although that gap almost disappears with the addition of Early Modern British (11) and is reversed with the further addition of Medieval (20).⁴

Why is US history so widespread in Australian universities?

Student interest: I have never heard of a course in US history in Australia that failed for want of student numbers. Quite the opposite: most of my colleagues feel swamped by their enrolments. US history has provided 'blockbuster' courses of several hundred students in the Universities of Sydney and Melbourne and Flinders University. Quite apart from the quality of teaching, US history clearly wins with students who seek a high degree of consonance with Australian cultural, demographic, political and social development, who shy away from studying non-English speaking cultures, who welcome a degree of familiarity through their heavy exposure to the US through the media, or who seek 'relevance' through study of the most powerful nation on earth. By way of contrast, the May 2004 issue of the Organization of American Historians *Newsletter* ran an article by Anita Nahal about 'Teaching American History in India.' Her University of Delhi has 300,000 students - of whom 1,200 study US history each year.⁵ If Delhi taught US history to the same proportion of its students as ANU does, that figure would be 13,000 each year instead of 1,200.

Staffing: Many historians of the US were hired by Australian universities during times of strong growth, and in particular the second half of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. These historians, by and large, remained through the leaner times of the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, although many have recently retired or are contemplating it. Many universities therefore have had existing staff to teach their programs in US history and have not had to undergo 'startup' hiring. This is not to say that US historians and US history were immune from restructuring and downsizing during the 1990s, but it is to say that the whole field did not have to undergo reinvention after the plague years.

The University of Sydney is a good - but unusually positive - example of this process at work. Through retirement and restructuring, US history within the old Department of History at Sydney declined from three US historians to one by the late 1990s. Transformed into the new School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry, and buttressed by a strategic decision to emphasise US history as a key research field, Sydney has hired a number of young historians specializing in the United States, and can now boast of up to six historians engaged in teaching and research in the field. This has propelled Sydney to the forefront of US history in Australia as the largest concentration of specialists in the nation. Clearly the Australian 'market' for US history is not big enough to repeat this growth and concentration across all universities, but Sydney's initiative provides a useful model for other, less ambitious, schemes to generate critical mass through a conscious corporate decision rather than through ad hoc staff replacement, non-replacement or redeployment decisions.

Institutional resources: Because of its relatively longstanding staff presence library resources in US history in older Australian universities have been traditionally good, especially in the State capital cities and Canberra. US dominance of the Internet has also created enormous and cheap digital resources that are easily available to students and staff alike. Student exchange schemes with US universities are common, many US students find it attractive to enroll in US history courses here (often in the false hope of easy points), and internship programs, such as that pioneered by Flinders and now joined by ANU, add to the allure of broader horizons through US politics and history.

The US itself: seems to be a very good recruiter for Australian students to enroll in at least a course or two in US history. This of course comes from the ubiquity of US influence on our media, culture, foreign policy, and politics. This ubiquity cuts both ways, but both positively and negatively many students are interested in the US and want to learn more about the colossus across the Pacific.

Love it AND loathe it: US history enrolments have often been affected by ebbs and flows in the popularity of the US in the community at large. But the results of this have often been surprising. While enrolments (in my institution at least) in Middle Eastern history and politics have shown quite dramatic elasticity to events there, those in US history have remained steadily high – which is to say that when the US is experiencing both (relative) popularity and unpopularity, students still seem interested in it. The difference is that more students report doing courses in US history in order to understand thine enemy while the polity itself is doing unpopular things, while during times when that is less evident, students are interested in learning more about the most powerful external cultural force in their lives. Perhaps the type of students varies with this phenomenon, but the numbers remain remarkably stable – and high.

High school curricula: I don't know enough about high school history curricula across Australia to comment much upon Millar and Peel's points about changes in High School curricula and their perceived squeezing out of history.⁶ I see the point raised by several of Millar and Peel's respondents about the lack of preparation in students less exposed to High School history, but I also mention the countervailing influence that students less exposed to history at school may be more eager to explore it in university. This syndrome was certainly at work in the days when Political Science/Government was either absent or underweighted in High School curricula – and I am not sure that Politics/Government enrollments suffered from that. In the NSW Higher School Certificate system, the scope of the American History module is now limited to 1898-1941, and in 2006 it will

be further cut back to cover only 1919-1941. Currently only about 10% of modern history students attempt questions in the HSC on the US history module. This represents a decline of 50% from the previous norm of about 20%.⁷

In the senior secondary system that I am most familiar with – the ACT Senior Colleges – US history has remained a constant but minor part of history courses across 10 government colleges and 10 private schools. Years 11 and 12 students in the ACT study at Senior Colleges, which are separate institutions from Years 7-10 High Schools. Only one of those colleges offers a comprehensive US history course, while most – but not all -- of the others offer component units on US history, usually thematically based, within their history offerings. Those US history components are often offered on a two-year rotation, so as to allow students the opportunity to enroll once during their time at college. Students can enroll in those components as they wish, meaning that US history is sometimes not taught at all over a two year cycle either because of low student interest or because of a decline in the number of teachers who feel inclined or qualified to teach US history. History in general in the ACT Senior Colleges shows the same pattern as Millar and Peel found around Australia: it is now a minor subject for most students and in many colleges. Its student numbers are eclipsed by enrollments in Literature courses – in which modules in US literature are very popular. This means that most college students of the humanities and social sciences in the ACT deal with the US at some time during their two years, but more often within the context of literature than history.⁸ This has relevance to my later points about the position of American Studies in tertiary institutions.

2. The future of US history within Australian tertiary history teaching

Millar and Peel suggest that history programs in Australia can be divided between ‘larger history departments and schools’ on the one hand and ‘smaller programs containing only a couple of historians’ on the other.⁹ For a sub-category such as US history this distinction is useful, between large departments/schools with three or more US historians (such as Flinders, the Universities of New South Wales and Sydney) and the majority of institutions with one or two US historians (such as the Universities of Melbourne, Tasmania, Western Australia, the ANU, and the Australian Catholic University). Even more crucial a distinction is the one between institutions with a single practitioner of US history and those with more than one.

As a component of History programs, US history is particularly susceptible to size factors within its host department/school/faculty. In a metropolitan

university with a large number of historians, it is easier to sustain (or create) a 'critical mass' of US historians. There might be two within a group of 15 historians. In a smaller history program, on the other hand, with between five and ten staff, it would be very unusual to find more than one historian trained in and dedicated to US history. In fact two US historians within a small history program would usually mean that it is unable to provide the broad range of offerings and expertise that all history programs aspire to.

Staffing cutbacks, restructuring and ordinary staff movements have also produced their own anomalies and consequences. Some departments (like that at Monash) lost their US history presence altogether through funding cutbacks of the 1990s; some, like the University of Sydney and ANU, which preserved their US history during those years, lost sizeable proportions of it through non-replacement of retired or resigned staff. The difference between two historians and one is crucial to any area. Assuming a normal rotation of sabbatical leave and semesterised courses, with two historians a program can run an offering of up to 4 courses per year in US history two years out of every three. Usually those staff will stagger their leaves so as to overlap their teaching, thus enabling US history to be taught by at least one academic every semester. That pattern makes it far easier to offer students a significant share of a major and a viable and regular honours program. With a sole practitioner, on the other hand, a sub-field is abandoned entirely for one semester out of seven, and students find it difficult to accumulate enough credit points in US history to undertake a fourth year in it. In my own case, as a sole practitioner in US history who also teaches a semester course on World War I once every two years, I will be able to offer a total of only seven semesters of US history over the next ten.

We all know that positions, once lost, are very hard to win back. This problem is often exacerbated by the agglomeration of departments into schools and the reorganization of faculties as a result of the widespread restructuring referred to by Millar and Peel. History departments (or their new entities) now have to agree within themselves about their next staffing priority and then argue that case within a school, and then to a Dean, and then perhaps to a Deputy Vice Chancellor. When (former) departments have lost more than one area the process of replacement is even longer and often more fraught. Further resignations or retirements can mean that areas can be shoved back further down the queue.

My own institution provides a good example. In 1990 we had one US history specialist, and then in 1993 we gained a Level A position in US history. In 1996 that position was transformed into a tenurable Level B post, and I thought then that US history could grow into a more significant field in our history offerings, able to run a suite of undergraduate courses,

Honours theses and graduate students. But then my colleague resigned in 2000, and we have not so far been able to replace him. This meant that US history subsided into sole practitioner status, with its consequent reductions in our offerings. Our attempts to replace the US post have been somewhat sidetracked into a succession of sessional posts, and over the past year has been effectively hijacked by our need to replace our sole practitioner in Medieval history, who is to retire shortly. The likelihood of ANU returning to our pre-2000 position of two full time Americanists is unclear over the short and medium terms –but the student numbers and interest in US history continues unabated. The problem thus becomes to satisfy that interest and to turn large undergraduate classes into significant numbers of fourth year honours students with only one staff member to teach and supervise them.

Of course none of these factors are unique to US history or to the ANU. But they do illustrate the difficulties that many institutions face in trying to regain a ‘critical mass’ – or at least a dual practitioner situation – that they enjoyed not so long ago. To my knowledge only some of the metropolitan universities and ‘departments’ – like those at the Universities of Sydney, NSW and Flinders University, and currently the University of Melbourne -- have been able recently to advertise specialist US history positions. Among smaller institutions and departments, US history is much more often listed as one of a list of desirable secondary fields for a position dedicated to something else. Last year the University of Southern Queensland advertised for a lecturer in World History, with US history named as a secondary field. As it turned out the successful applicant was indeed a US historian, and will teach US history as fits with her primary responsibility to a World History course. This will entrench an existing US history survey course taught at USQ, but will not create ‘critical mass’ in US history there. USQ will have a sole practitioner in US history, but one who has other commitments in her teaching duties. Although this is a better outcome than no US historian at all, it is important to remember that this result comes from staff expertise rather than from a strategic decision made before the appointment was made.

3. US history in Australia and the quest for relevance

Millar and Peel refer to a common feeling among some of their respondents, especially from institutions less affected by 1990s restructuring, that their work is shifting from the ‘training of future historians’ to ‘teaching a wider and wider range of students with less clear-cut commitments and connections to the discipline.’¹⁰ This came as a surprise to me from two perspectives – the first more generic than the second. Firstly it surprises me that any of my colleagues still saw our mission in such terms; I think it amazing that anyone facing a lecture class of 50, or 100, or 200 people

really thinks that our primary function is to train future historians. Secondly, and less generically, in smaller institutions such as my own we historians are well used to training students in the *skills of history* without thinking that they will *become* historians. About half of all ANU undergraduates are enrolled in combined or joint degrees; the Arts/Law degree has always loomed large in our Arts cohort, and over the past three years we have seen explosive growth in our International Relations Degree, to which many history courses can count. So we are well used to teaching students whose interest in history is either instrumental or tangential.

US history is of course very well suited to this sort of constituency. Its connections to International Relations, Cultural Studies and Law are clear and convincing to many students. Students do not, in my experience, need to be convinced about the 'relevance' of US history, and this is borne out by the high enrolment numbers across the nation. Students are well aware of the power and the pervasiveness of the United States upon their own lives as well as upon the nation and the entire world. That conception of US power and influence tends to be expressed as often as not in cultural terms, even before political, diplomatic and military ones.

This goes some way towards explaining the steady growth of what are called 'American Studies' majors and programmes in many universities. These, it seems to me, are most prevalent in smaller universities which face difficulties of 'critical mass' outlined above. There are, of course, prominent exceptions – the Universities of Queensland and Melbourne advertise American Studies programs, and the oldest, biggest and best-known American Studies program is at Flinders University. At Flinders, under the leadership of Don DeBats, there exists a unique beast in Australian universities – a Department of American Studies. That department offers 12 undergraduate courses in US history, politics, literature and economics, as well as graduate programs and an internship scheme in Washington DC. With these exceptions, however, it is fair to say that the larger universities and the larger history departments or schools have stuck more closely to their discipline.

American Studies majors/programmes come in different forms and with different rationales. Flinders is itself a centre of critical mass with a clearly articulated teaching and research rationale. Others have more pragmatic origins and aspirations. They are often designed to simulate critical mass within structures that can no longer generate it through concentrations of discipline-based scholars. At ANU, for example, we created an American Studies major in order to provide a vehicle for combining the courses of three sole practitioners in three different areas – political science, literature and history – into a single major. All of us had very high student numbers,

and that made it impossible to put on additional and jointly taught courses. Combining our individual courses into a major seemed a sensible – and resource neutral -- way to encourage our students to see their studies in American history or literature or politics as part of a larger intellectual journey.

What we have found so far at ANU is that students are very happy to study the US in their own disciplines but much less willing to sign up for a major in American Studies. I am not sure of the reasons for this, and I am very interested to know whether this is typical or not across other universities. Perhaps students do not like to characterize their degrees with an American Studies major through loyalty to disciplinarity; perhaps they are reluctant to characterize their degrees with an ‘American’ label through their disapproval of the United States. Certainly we have heard evidence of the latter from students and their parents at various Open Days. Perhaps it is too early to tell, or perhaps students can see what we are frank to point out – that the American Studies major is an exercise in making the best of a bad job (staffing shortages and high student numbers) rather than a pedagogical statement backed by adequate staffing resources and clear organizational visibility as occurs at Flinders or within the History areas of larger universities.

My last point on the contentious area of ‘relevance’ concerns graduate study and research. Many universities – especially the Universities of Sydney, NSW, Melbourne, Queensland and Flinders University – have long had large numbers of PhD and MA students in US history. The situation is less clear outside the large state capitals. Certainly at ANU we have never had a strong tradition of graduate study in US history despite high undergraduate numbers since the middle 1970s. Our Research School of Social Sciences has had only three PhD students in US history during its entire existence, and in my area I have had only a handful of PhD and intermediate degree thesis students over the past 14 years. I am not sure about the reasons for this. Despite the wealth of materials on US history held in the ANU, ADFA and National Libraries – and despite our predominance of public-sector employment which values graduate qualifications in the social sciences -- we have had little interest in graduate thesis work, and only moderate graduate coursework enrolments. I know that the big metropolitan universities have attracted much larger numbers of graduate students who pursue further study more out of interest than clear career aspiration, and perhaps Canberra does not have a large enough population to create that wellspring of interest. Or perhaps we simply have not beaten the bushes loudly enough.

It does seem to me that many US historians in Australia have ambiguous feelings about PhDs in US history in Australian universities. Many of us, probably a majority of us, were trained in US graduate schools, with their preliminary MA requirement, their combination of coursework and dissertation and their hurdles and rituals of language requirements, the requirement of a major and a minor field, MA/PhD oral examinations and dissertation defences. Many of us came back as disciples of that system and as critics of the Anglo-Australian model of teaching graduate students. Some of us tried to interest our own institutions in adopting the US model, at least in part – and we have been rebuffed by the very strong arguments of cost, the less strong argument of tradition and uniformity, and the even weaker argument over quality. All of us have noted the tendency of many Australian universities to hire graduates (who are often Australian) of US institutions to fill whatever positions that do become available in US history. Perhaps I and some of my colleagues have dwelt in a twilight zone regarding graduate education in US history – from (in my case at least) a remnant feeling that PhD work, unlike undergraduate education, should retain the goal of teaching future historians. And who can say that it is better for a brilliant graduate in US history from ANU to do a PhD in our field at ANU compared to a top-flight US graduate school – or a large Australian metropolitan research university -- with critical mass in its US history area and a sizeable cohort of graduate students?

It seems that only a few of us Americanists will escape the twilight zone in the foreseeable future. Those universities prepared to invest heavily in US history and American Studies, such as the University of Sydney and Flinders University, will reap the benefits of cementing their places as centres of excellence and productivity in our field. This is both inevitable and desirable, and will hopefully provide an example for other universities to follow if they wish to improve their standing as centres for teaching and research into the United States. In other ways, however, this bifurcation will lead to an increasing fragmentation of American studies in Australia between those universities prepared to fund American history as a significant **area** of teaching and research endeavour and those content to leave it as a small, marginalized **corner** of their activities.

For the rest of us, teaching large groups as single practitioners or at best part of a duo, we face the challenge of simultaneously doing our best with limited resources and persuading our institutions of the need to do more. Large or small, however, we Americanists also face common challenges: how do we best train our undergraduates about the development of the world's most powerful nation? How best can we prepare our graduate students not only for careers as historians, but also as experts in the American experience? Is it time to pool our scattered resources into more

common programs that can expose our students to wider ranges of expertise, methods and approaches to history? For those of our graduate students who aspire to academic jobs, how best can we prepare them to compete more effectively with graduates from US universities? How can we provide more opportunities, beyond those of limited and sometimes shrinking fieldwork budgets, for our students to spend significant amounts of time in the US, to soak up not only its history and historiography but also its sights, sounds and smells? By addressing these and many other questions we can help to continue a tradition that has been very successful over the past fifty years – that of teaching US history with an Australian accent in ways that will continue to fill our lecture halls – and, perhaps, free us from some of the ambiguities and marginalization of the twilight zone.

ENDNOTES

¹ A version of this paper was delivered as part of a panel on U.S. History in Australia with Ian Tyrrell and David Goodman to the 2004 Australian Historical Association Biennial Convention in Newcastle in July 2004. I want to thank my two co-panellists and Dr Amanda Laugesen for their assistance with this paper.

² Carly Millar and Mark Peel, 'Final Draft Report to the AHA Executive: Australian Historical Association 2003-4 History Curriculum Review,' Appendices 4a and 2. Millar and Peel's report will be published in the December 2004 issue of *History Australia*.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Anita Nahal, 'Teaching American History in India: Case Study of the University of Delhi,' *OAH Newsletter*, May 2004, p.7.

⁶ Millar and Peel, 'Final Draft Report,' pp.5-6

⁷ I am indebted to Bruce Dennett and Paul Kiem of the History Teachers Association of NSW for this information.

⁸ I am indebted to Richard Gorrell, former Chair of the History Panel of the ACT Board of Senior School Studies, for this information.

⁹ Millar and Peel, 'Final Draft Report,' p.3.

¹⁰ Ibid.