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'History Wars Revisited'

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History Wars Revisited

Doug Munro¹

Every book has a back story, which is sometimes more interesting than the book itself. Books also have afterlives, both in their immediate impact and their longer-term influence. The afterlives of history texts tend to be short—sometimes also nasty and brutish, depending on the reviews and wider reception. Even books that were initially influential quietly fade away in the face of changing fashions and the chilly winds of revisionism. Occasionally a book will have immediate *and* lasting success. E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963; revised 1969) has sold hundreds of thousands of copies, has been translated into several languages, has remained continuously in print for over sixty years, and has featured in numerous special issues and symposia in mainstream journals.² We lesser mortals can only envy its enduring influence and success, despite critiques. Instead, we lower our sights and cross our fingers that our books are spared the fate of dropping from sight before the year is out.

In 2021 I had published a middling-sized monograph titled *History Wars*, which has had moderate success – enough to prompt me to reflect five years later on how the book came about, the extent it has made its way in the world and how its afterlife has panned out thus far.³

¹ I wish to express my thanks to the Editor-in-chief of this journal, Dr. Jatinder Mann for his patience in awaiting the submission of my article and then for his careful editing and useful feedback.

² E.g. "E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* at Fifty," *Labour/Le Travail* 72 (2013): 205–52; "Britain's Marxist Historians?" *Social History* 39, no. 2 (2014): 149–81. "E.P. Thompson after Fifty Years," *Journal of Social History* 48, no. 4 (2015): 753–841; "The Global E.P. Thompson," *International Review of Social History* 61, no. 1 (2016): 1–93; "E. P. Thompson in African History," *Journal of African History*, 58, no. 1 (2017): 1–59.

³ Doug Munro, *History Wars: The Peter Ryan – Manning Clark controversy* (ANU Press, 2021).

Setting

The book was a discussion of Australia's History Wars based around a particular episode—namely, the Peter Ryan-Manning Clark controversy, 1993–94. To recap, in the September 1993 issue of the conservative journal *Quadrant* (then edited by Robert Manne), Peter Ryan (1923–2015) published a damning account of Manning Clark (1915–91), condemning both the man and his works.⁴ Ryan had been the Director of Melbourne University Press (MUP) from 1962 through to 1989 and during his tenure had published five of the six volumes of Clark's epic *A History of Australia*. Describing his onslaught as 'an overdue axe [being] laid to the stalk of a tall poppy,' Ryan unveiled Clark as a charlatan, a poseur, and a dreadful mistake as a human being, and the *History* was condemned as being sloppy, appallingly written and pernicious. Ryan not only denounced the man and his works but went on to say, with the zeal of the repentant sinner:

Of the many things in my life upon which I must look back with shame, the chiefest is that of having been the publisher of Clark's *History of Australia*, and of having given him that support and encouragement which an author expects of his publisher.⁵

Never before, or since, has an Australian publisher publicly repudiated an author, least of all an author of that stature; Manning Clark was arguably Australia's best-known historian and, moreover, was revered in some quarters as well as being

⁴ Ryan's attack on Clark and his replies to critics were spread over three issues of *Quadrant*: Peter Ryan, "Manning Clark," *Quadrant* 37, no. 9 (September 1993): 9–22; Ryan, "A Reply to my Critics," *Quadrant* 37, no. 10 (October 1993): 11–14; Ryan, "The Charge of the Lightweight Brigade," *Quadrant*, vol. 38, no. 10 (October 1994): 10–14. The three articles were republished in Ryan's *Lines of Fire: Manning Clark & Other Writings*, edited by A.K. Macdougall (Clarion Editions, 1997): 179–214, 214–22, 222–34, respectively.

⁵ Ryan, "Manning Clark," 10 (*Lines of Fire*, 181).

reviled in conservative circles. All hell broke loose, which gratified Ryan's every desire.

Ryan's strictures against Clark would hardly have become a 'runaway *succès de scandale*'⁶ had they remained within the confines of the low-circulation 'little magazine' that *Quadrant* was. Rather, it was the function of a media feeding frenzy that placed it squarely within the public domain, especially when the story was taken up by *The Australian*. There is no question that *The Australian*'s intervention was an orchestrated campaign calculated to inflict maximum damage on Clark, who had become an unflinching Labor partisan with 'an unsurpassed talent for getting up conservative nostrils.'⁷ It was a short-lived *Blitzkrieg*, or perhaps carpet bombing, on the part of the Murdoch media. What also raised the temperature was the print media (and *Quadrant*) cashing in on a good story of their own creation and giving space to both Ryan supporters and Ryan detractors. Ryan for his part gave as good as he got. He was taking no prisoners.

The media storm—described at the time as a 'wretched ... nine-day wonder'⁸—quickly blew over, as these things do. Yet the Ryan-Clark affair was more than a momentary storm in a teacup. Memorable for its intensity, the controversy matters because it exposed fault lines and fissures in the ongoing Australia History Wars. These had been reignited by the controversies surrounding the way in which Australia had been represented at the 1988 Bicentennial celebrations and showed no signs of abating.⁹

⁶ The phrase is Peter Craven's, "The Ryan Affair." In *Manning Clark: Essays on his Place in History*, ed. Carl Bridge (Melbourne University Press, 1994), 168.

⁷ Stephen Foster and Margaret Varghese, *The Making of the Australian National University, 1946–1996* (Allen & Unwin, 1996), 288.

⁸ Stuart Macintyre, "Why do the Tories Hate Manning Clark?" in ("Symposium Defending Manning Clark"), *Evatt Papers* 1, no. 2 (1993): 17.

⁹ See "Making the Bicentenary," special issue of *Australian Historical Studies* (edited by Susan Janson and Stuart Macintyre) 23, no. 91 (1988): 1–201; Tony Bennett, Pat Buckridge, David Carter

The Bicentenary celebrations had crystalised the Australia History Wars around hot-button issues of the day, namely the British connection, immigration policy and multiculturalism, republicanism versus monarchism, frontier conflict and the interpretation of Aboriginal history, as well as Indigenous rights and redress. The History Wars revolved around identity and how Australia should define itself and, with little exception, the divisions split down party-political lines. There were two competing visions; each had its prime minister (Paul Keating versus John Howard) and each had its historian (Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey, respectively). Keating took the *History Wars* in new directions by repudiating deference to the British heritage and announcing his vision for a republican nationalism, engagement with Asia and Aboriginal reconciliation—the so-called ‘Big Picture,’ which he aggressively pursued. Clark was widely perceived to be Keating’s muse but this is to exaggerate; rather, it was a case of shared values.¹⁰

Howard’s vision was quite the opposite. He singled Clark out as propagating a negative and gloomy view of Australia’s past. In his own words, he had a ‘less than rapturous view of the Manning Clark view of Australian history’ insisting that ‘the balance sheet of our history is one of heroic achievement.’¹¹ Howard’s historian was Geoffrey Blainey who, a month before the Ryan-Clark controversy erupted, had criticised Clark’s ‘Black Armband view of history’, which he felt focussed too much on past injustices toward Aborigines.¹² As Blainey later explained, three years or so later

and Colin Mercer (eds), *Celebrating the Nation: A Critical Study of Australia’s Bicentenary* (Allen & Unwin, 1992). The remainder of this section is drawn from Munro, *History Wars*, 101–18.

¹⁰ Keating sprung to Clark’s defence when the controversy erupted. Scott Henry and Robert Garran, “Keating Lauds Clark’s Gift of Imagination,” *Weekend Australian* 28–29 August 1993: 4.

¹¹ Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne University Press, 2004), 50–51.

¹² Geoffrey Blainey, “Drawing up a Balance Sheet of Our History,” *Quadrant* 37, no. 7–8 (July–August 1993): 10–15; republished in Blainey, *In Our Time* (Information Australia, 1999), 3–14. The article was initially delivered as the Latham Lecture, hosted by the conservative Australian Association for Cultural Freedom. Ryan himself described the “black-armband” perspective as a “depressing and

Howard latched on to the phrase and ‘it suddenly took off like a rocket.’¹³ In the event, Howard’s overtly patriotic vision of Australian history, although contested, gained ascendancy. For the duration of his prime ministership, patriotism became an expressed public doctrine and the dominant public discourse.

Back Story

My book on the Ryan-Clark controversy was an exercise in curiosity-driven research, *pur et simple*. It was an offshoot of my interest in historians’ biographies as a genre and academics’ lives generally.¹⁴ What piqued my interest was the controversy being touched on in the various biographies of Manning Clark, but these did not answer what I felt the primary questions: why did Ryan continue to publish a multivolume work that he considered substandard, and why did he not tackle Clark about these perceived shortcomings at any point in their 25-year professional relationship?¹⁵ Neither did the other accounts which touched on the controversy, including the only extended account at that point—a 23-page book chapter by Peter Craven written soon after the event but without the benefit of archival sources.¹⁶ The desire to know why Ryan behaved as he did continued to build and in early 2014 I decided to write a forensic journal article that would hopefully provide the answers. The deciding factor

debilitating presentation of our history [that] leads nowhere, except perhaps to some great southern wailing wall.” Peter Ryan, “Geoffrey Blainey,” *Quadrant* 39, no. 1–2 (January-February 1995): 120.

¹³ Quoted in Richard Allsop, *Geoffrey Blainey: Writer, Historian, Controversialist* (Monash University Publishing, 2002), 191.

¹⁴ Doug Munro, “Biographies of Historians – or, The Cliographer’s Craft,” *Australian Historical Studies* 43, no. 1 (2012): 11–27; Munro, *The Ivory Tower and Beyond: Participant Historians of the Pacific* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009). I was also engaged in co-authored work on Australian-based anthropologist, starting with Geoffrey Gray and Doug Munro, “Australian Aboriginal Anthropology at the Crossroads: Finding a Successor to A. P. Elkin, 1955,” *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 22, no. 3 (2012): 351–69.

¹⁵ Stephen Holt, *A Short History of Manning Clark* (Allen & Unwin, 1999), 233–36; Brian Matthews, *Manning Clark: A Life* (Sydney: 2008), 472–74; and especially Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark* (Miegunyah Press, 2011), 686–90.

¹⁶ Humphrey McQueen, *Suspect History: Manning Clark and the Future of Australia’s Past* (Wakefield Press, 1997), 128, 162–63; Macintyre and Clark, *The History Wars*, 64–67, 226; Craven, “The Ryan Affair,” 165–87.

was the papers of Ryan and Clark (and also Dymphna Clark) now being available for consultation in the National Library of Australia. As sometimes happens, the intended article grew like topsy into a small book.

Living in Aotearoa New Zealand while my sources were located in Australia created logistical difficulties, not to mention my research being self-funded. At least I was only just into formal retirement so my time was my own, and the research trips were combined with visiting my mother and daughters in Adelaide. I could not have got through the research but for my trusty Samsung digital camera. Gone were the days of laborious notetaking and expensive photocopying but even so I still felt rushed. I described my visits to the National Library, as well as the University of Melbourne Archives to consult the MUP records, as 'smash-and-grab raids,' unaware that the term was already in currency.¹⁷ It was also a godsend that the papers of Peter Ryan and Dymphna Clark (Manning's wife) contained folders of newspaper clippings relating to the controversy. The advantage here was much more than a matter of economising on time. Given that the media scrum only lasted a fortnight, I could have rounded-up much of the newspaper material by consulting the *Australian*, the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* on microfilm. It would have been desperately tedious work but it was manageable. The advantage of those folders of clippings was they brought to light the sizeable residue of obscure newspaper material, much of which I would not likely have found otherwise. Those folders certainly made a difference to the eventual outcome, to put it mildly.

The only formal interview was with Michael Cathcart, who had prepared the condensed edition of Clark's *History of Australia*. I compensated with discussions

¹⁷ Richard Dunley and Jo Pugh, "Do Archive Catalogues Make History?: Exploring Interactions between Historians and Archives," *Twentieth Century British History* 32, no. 4 (2021): 605.

and e-mail exchanges with numerous individuals, and was surprised at the level of interest. Most such engagements were one-off affairs but there were lengthy e-mails and discussions with Graeme Davison, Mark McKenna, Frank Bongiorno, Roslyn Russell, and Stuart Macintyre (who to my great sorrow died almost a month to the day after *History Wars* was published). I did not contact Peter Ryan, for reasons explained in *History Wars*:

Initially, I was not far enough into the research to ask the right questions.... The further I got into the research the more I realised that Ryan was misleading, wrong or just plain downright dishonest in so many matters. There came the point when I decided not to contact him, realising that an interview, or even correspondence, would likely be confrontational and unproductive. It is hard to see what would have been accomplished and I would probably have been accused of harassing a defenceless old man who was in poor health.¹⁸

The writing of *History Wars* started in earnest in early 2018 and it progressed steadily enough, although ('Doug being Doug', as my friends would say) I could never rid myself of distractions or from assuming new commitments too good to pass over.¹⁹ At least I found the actual writing straightforward enough, until I came to the chapter that became 'Deliberations: Manning Clark and the History Wars,' and then I hit a wall for a while. Writing this chapter proved unexpectedly difficult and structuring the chapter was a real headache. The latter was a microcosm of the eventual book, as it turned out: organising the material into a coherent whole was the single most

¹⁸ Munro, *History Wars*, xxxiv.

¹⁹ E.g. Doug Munro, "Oliver MacDonagh: foundation Professor of History at Flinders University," *History Australia* 15, no. 4 (2018): 638–56; Munro, "From Reticence to Revelation: Biography in New Zealand." In *Different Lives: Global Perspectives on Biography in Public Cultures and Societies*, eds. Hans Renders and David Veltman in association with Madelon Nanninga-Franssen (Brill, 2020).

difficult task. At another level, obtaining permissions to reproduce the book's nine illustrations was time-consuming beyond belief.

Along the way I wondered which publishers I might approach. I was put-off by the demands and unwelcoming tone of a couple of Sydney publishing houses—perhaps their way of fending off the clamouring multitude. The ANU Press was an obvious candidate but having already published three co-edited books with them I did not wish to outstay my welcome. In late-2018, when *History Wars* was about two-thirds written, I approached Monash University Press; they had a good Australian list and their books, importantly, featured footnotes rather than endnotes. The publisher, Nathan Hollier, gave me the time of day but that is as far as it got. Melbourne University Publishing was another obvious choice but by then Nathan had moved from Monash University Publishing to its Melbourne counterpart, so no point in trying them out. Nathan is now the Press Manager of the ANU Press!

Unbeknownst to me, a short biography of Peter Ryan (*Ryan's Luck*, by journalist John Tidey) was concurrently in preparation. It appeared in late 2020 as my own book was grinding its way toward completion. I promptly ordered a copy but need not have worried about being scooped because Tidey's account of the Ryan-Clark controversy largely follows Ryan's version of events whereas I was disputing it. Nonetheless, Tidey fleshed out some details and corrected me in a couple of instances. He also had access to material in family keeping unobtainable to myself—'a vast array of letters, pictures, files and clippings'²⁰—but it was too late for me to worry about that. The important thing at the time was the reassurance that my account was not going to suffer by comparison with his.

²⁰ John Tidey, *Ryan's Luck: A Life of Peter Ryan MM* (Arcadia, 2020), 104–12.

I eventually decided to approach the ANU Press's Social Sciences Editorial Board, chaired by Frank Bongiorono. The manuscript was submitted in early May 2020 and was considered by the Board members, who wanted revisions before proceeding further. The idea here, and a good one, was to sort out problems in advance of the manuscript being sent to external referees. The Board members wanted some reorganisation of the text, notably in the biographical material on Ryan and Clark being placed up-front and the broader conclusions being stated at the outset 'without giving the show away.' They also wanted the addition of bio-details of people mentioned in the text, and finally the text itself had to be reduced by 10,000 words. I meekly complied, although the suggested revisions often involved additions, so ultimately the text was reduced by only 5000 words. The revised (and *much* improved) text passed muster with the referees, who had valuable suggestions of their own. This resulted in further revisions and then the manuscript was gone over by an approved copy editor (Carolyn Brewer), as per ANU Press requirements. Finally, almost 18 months after first submission, the book was published on 21 October 2021. It had taken almost eight years from conception to completion.

Immediate impact

Promotion is the handmaiden of impact and the ANU Press's efforts got *History Wars* off to a good start. Being an on-line publisher, with provision for on-demand printing, the Press had no need to 'flog' the book with an eye for sales, as a traditional academic publisher would. In my case, the Press evidently thought *History Wars* topical or in some way noteworthy and made special efforts on my behalf. A few days after actual publication, a 'Meet the Author' interview was posted on the ANU Press website where I answered such questions as: why I wrote the book, why I thought

the story important to tell, the process of writing the book, why I chose the ANU Press to publish it, and what I planned to do next.²¹ The Press also included *History Wars* as a featured title in its 2022 *Catalogue*.²² The covid lockdowns precluded a launch in Canberra. Disappointingly, the Press's attempts to arrange radio interviews came to nothing, to my surprise. I thought *History Wars* might be in with a chance for Category 2B of the Mander Jones Award—for the best publication that uses, features or interprets Australian archives—but no joy there either

Elsewhere at ANU, *History Wars* scored a notice in the 'Bookshelf' section of the monthly ANU emeritus faculty magazine.²³ Beyond ANU, the book received miscellaneous notices and had momentary fame as an *Australian Book Review's* 'Book of the Week'.²⁴ All this is small fry. More important were the two interviews for *H-Biography* and Carl Rollyson's *A Life in Biography* podcast series.²⁵ *History Wars* had clearly not dipped beneath the horizon in the short term.

²¹ "Meet the Author," 25 October 2021, <https://press.anu.edu.au/news-events/meet-author-doug-munro>.

²² ANU Press 2022 *Catalogue*: 8, https://press.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/2022_catalogue.pdf.

²³ *Emeritus: The Australian National University Emeritus Faculty E-magazine*, 12:10 (November 2021): 10, <https://emeritus.anu.edu.au/resources/news/Emeritus%20Vol%2012%20No%2010%20-%20November%202021.pdf>.

²⁴ Nieuws/News, Biografie Instituut, University of Groningen [4 October 2021], <https://www.rug.nl/research/c/medelingen> (URL no longer valid); *Quadrivia: The HPI Bulletin* (University of Queensland), December 2021, https://comms.uq.edu.au/v/39308/2669675/email.html?k=E2d61yRmpoodUcDsOBui0US-aOyC8r7D2PAP_sEcgl0 (URL no longer valid); 'Another Wonderful Review for History@UQ Honorary Doug Munro's New Book, "History Wars: The Peter Ryan – Manning Clark Controversy," *History at UQ*, 21 December 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/HistoryUQ/posts/another-wonderful-review-for-historyug-honorary-doug-munros-new-book-history-war/3017926151817794/>; *Australian Book Review's* 'Book of the Week', 10 January 2022. See also Jaimi Schmid, "The ANU Press's Thousandth Title," *Australian Book Review's* "Book Talk" [undated but May 2022 or earlier], <https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/features/book-talk/464-book-talk/8961-anu-press-s-thousandth-title-by-jaimi-schmid> (URL no longer valid); "News, Reviews, Interviews." *Wakefield Weekly* 21 October 2022 [e-mailed to subscribers].

²⁵ David Veltman, "Telling Academic Lives: An Interview with Doug Munro and Don Longo," *H-Biography*, 28 November 2021, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/6709654/blog/eminant-biographers-interviews-about-art-and-craft-writing-scholarly-sound>; "The History Wars! In Australia, but it happens here too. Biographers Beware," 23 January 2023, in Carl Rollyson's *A Life in Biography* podcast series, <https://anchor.fm/carl-rollyson/episodes/The-History-Wars--In-Australia--but-it-happens-here-too--Biographers-Beware-e1tr6hq>; <https://creators.spotify.com/pod/profile/carl-rollyson/episodes/Doug-Munro-on-Biography-and-History-Where-They-Meet-and-Deviate-e1t7cip>, Carl Rollyson, *A Life in Biography*, <https://creators.spotify.com/pod/profile/carl-rollyson/>.

Another measure of impact is the reviews. By my count there have been ten in all, mostly by people I have never met. The first three appeared in quick succession, which served to keep *History Wars* in the spotlight.²⁶ The reviews in academic journals were longer in coming.²⁷ They were gratifyingly positive, even if qualifications lurked in the background. After praising the extent of my archival research, Richard Waterhouse described *History Wars* as ‘a carefully and (mostly) convincingly argued book.’ He also pointed out that ‘although the Ryan-Clark controversy was linked to a wider context, it was very much conducted along a Melbourne-Canberra axis.’²⁸ Most of the *dramatis personae* (Ryan and Clark included) did indeed have connections, past or present, with the School of History at the University of Melbourne, which I should have thought to mention as it illustrates the extent of the Melbourne department’s reach. At another level, Rob Pascoe felt that I had fallen short of ‘entirely answer[ing] the question as to why Ryan behaved in such an appalling manner when he broke all the conventions of a publisher-author relationship in 1993.’²⁹ I thought I had, but never mind. We will leave that as an honest difference of opinion between a reviewer and his victim.

The letdown was the somewhat rambling 1700+ word review by Ross Fitzgerald in none other than *Quadrant*.³⁰ I was hoping and praying that *Quadrant*,

²⁶ Josh Black, *Australian Policy and History* 16 December 2021, <https://aph.org.au/2021/12/book-review-history-wars/>; Patrick Mullins, *Canberra Times* 26 November 2021: 1–2 (“Inside Story” section), <https://insidestory.org.au/tall-poppy-logging/> (republished in: “Cold war captives, Tall-poppy Lopping, and Other Summer Reading from the Archive,” selection of nine books e-mailed to subscribers of *Inside Story*, 31 December 2022); Mark McKenna, *Australian Book Review*, 439 (January–February 2022): 13–14.

²⁷ Nicholas Brown, *Labour History* 123 (2022): 219–22; Bobby Oliver, *Australian Historical Studies* 53, no. 1 (2022): 173–74; Rob Pascoe, *History Australia* 19, no. 3 (2022): 625–26; Andrew Bonnell, *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 69, no. 1 (2023): 164–65; Mark Crotty, *Australian Journal of Biography and History* 7 (2023): 261–63, https://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/n10814/pdf/book_review04.pdf; Richard Waterhouse, *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 108, no. 1 (2022): 119–20. There is also a solitary newspaper review by Carl Rollyson in *The Sun* (New York), 1 February 2023.

²⁸ Waterhouse, review in *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 120.

²⁹ Pascoe, review in *History Australia*, 626.

³⁰ Ross Fitzgerald, *Quadrant* 66, no. 1–2 (2022): 101–03.

true to form, would come out all guns blazing and give *History Wars* ‘the treatment.’ I could then respond and the ensuing controversy would raise the book’s profile. Although there are no fireworks, Fitzgerald’s review contains numerous low-grade errors, false constructions, and misrepresentations. Some of these are not so low-grade. Take the assertion that I ‘rather unconvincing’ claim that the most incriminating evidence against Ryan is found in his own papers and in his autobiography (*Final Proof*).³¹ How anyone could arrive at that conclusion on the basis of reading *History Wars* passeth all understanding, a point which I will come back to.

By contrast, having the ANU Press as my publisher was a great good fortune and this extended well beyond their efforts to promote the book. The Press observes the highest editorial standards (whose rigour and exactness were admittedly sometimes exasperating) and there is an air of positivity about its people; they make a point of working *with* authors, unlike another publisher I had the misfortune to encounter, and they *listen* to you. The other advantage is their financial model. Being an on-line publisher providing free downloads, they did not have to fret over sales, as a conventional publisher would—and especially as hard copy academic books are becoming increasingly expensive. I have no idea how many on-line ‘hits’ *History Wars* has scored, and neither have I troubled to find out the citation count. But I am certain that recourse to free downloads, via both the Press and OPEAN, has resulted in *History Wars* having a far greater reach than would otherwise have been the case.³²

³¹ Peter Ryan, *Final Proof: Memoirs of a Publisher* (Quadrant Books, 2010).

³² *History Wars* is available from OPEAN on <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/27aacc0c-7ae3-4b04-83bc-93bf94dc4121/book.pdf>. As journalist Stephen Matchett pointed out, Taylor & Francis charges \$47 for non-subscribers to read Rob Pascoe’s 2-page review of *History Wars* whereas 229-page e-version of the book is free to all comers. Stephen Matchett, “Compare the Publishing Pair,”

History Wars continued to crop up from time to time. In early 2023, it encountered a speed bump with the appearance of Stuart Kells commissioned centenary history of Melbourne University Press/Publishing. Kells suggested *History Wars* among a number of other books as ‘further reading’ but he completely ignores it in his chapter on the Ryan-Clark controversy.³³ The giveaway is Kells’s version of the early publishing history of Clark’s *A History of Australia*. Following Ryan, he states that Clark turned to MUP to publish his *History* after Angus & Robertson had turned him down. To the contrary. Angus & Robertson were sorry to have missed out. Kells also follows Ryan in saying that he (Ryan) inherited a contract from his predecessor at MUP that locked him into publishing as many volumes of the *History* as Clark cared to write, irrespective of their scholarly merits. Not so: the MUP records and the Manning Clark papers unambiguously show that the contract for Clark’s *History* was drawn up by Ryan himself a year after the publication of the first volume.³⁴ In other words, Ryan’s repeated claims that his hands were contractually tied in the matter of Clark’s *History* are quite simply untrue. Truth be told, my initial feeling on first reading Kells was that I might as well not have written my own book. But justice was served when no less than three reviewers pointed out that Kells had commended *History Wars* without utilising its findings—an indication that my book was being read in the right places after all.³⁵ *History Wars* was seemingly alive and well and hopefully making itself useful.

Campus Morning Mail (University of Western Sydney), 26 July 2022, <https://campusmorningmail.com.au/news/compare-the-publishing-pair/>.

³³ Stuart Kells, *MUP: A Centenary History* (Miegunyah Press, 2023), 278–87, 517.

³⁴ Kells, *MUP*, 286–87, 488 (*History Wars*, 47–49).

³⁵ Colin Steele, *Canberra Times* 4 March 2023, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8098530/the-long-winding-tale-of-publisher/>; Dominic Kelly, *The Conversation* 16 March 2023, <https://theconversation.com/mup-has-commissioned-a-history-of-itself-the-result-is-illuminating-but-in-striving-for-neutrality-it-falls-short-199873> (republished in *The Conversation* 19 March 2023, https://medium.com/@dominickelly_/book-review-stuart-kells-mup-a-centenary-history-35b69dc52edc and in *Medium* 19 March 2023, https://medium.com/@dominickelly_/book-review-35b69dc52edc).

Enter Robert Manne

History Wars's afterlife received a shot in the arm of sorts with the publication of Robert Manne's autobiography (*A Political Memoir*) in 2024.³⁶ Manne, a prominent Australian public intellectual and emeritus professor at La Trobe University, was the *Quadrant* editor when Peter Ryan hit out at Manning Clark in 1993–94 and he was most helpful when I was writing *History Wars*. As I said in my acknowledgments, Rob's 'assistance and courtesy were all the more generous given that we disagree on some matters of interpretation.'³⁷ As Manne said in one of our initial e-mail encounters:

I ... believe you have got [Ryan] wrong. Your portrait is one of a rogue, indifferent to the truth, consciously lying about matters so long as he could get away with it. As I've written in my comments [on your draft], Ryan was curmudgeonly, perhaps complacently old-fashioned, highly opinionated, but in his own way, principled, and a stickler for truth.³⁸

The depth of our disagreements became evident in *Political Memoir*, although we are at one in finding little merit in Clark's *History*. Manne puts it better than I ever could in saying that the *History* degenerated 'into a standard left-versus-right Punch and Judy Show, where Manning "barracked" for the "Young Tree Green" of Australian radical nationalism and jeered at the "Old Dead Tree" of Austral/British sycophancy."³⁹

Acknowledging that *History Wars* was 'impressively scholarly,' Manne then mentioned that I was, 'at least in [his] view, imperceptive regarding Ryan's motivation

[stuart-kellss-mup-a-centenary-history-35b69dc52edc](#); Frank Bongiorno, *Australian Book Review* no. 452 (April 2023).

³⁶ Robert Manne, *A Political Memoir: Intellectual Combat in the Cold War and the Culture Wars* (La Trobe University Press/Black Inc., 2024), 268–74.

³⁷ Munro, *History Wars*, xii.

³⁸ Manne, e-mail to author, 10 March 2019.

³⁹ Manne, *A Political Memoir*, 270.

and character.⁴⁰ He went on to say that I had documented in detail the ‘several standard lines of criticism’ against Ryan. These, in Manne’s words, included:

That Ryan was a coward, having waited for [Clark’s] death before unloading on him. Ryan was cruel, indifferent to the pain he was willing to inflict on Clark’s family and especially his loyal (and long-suffering) wife, Dymphna. Ryan was a traitor, having turned on a man whom he had treated in life as an intimate friend, and a hypocrite, having never criticised to his face a historian he had published and praised for three decades but clearly secretly despised. He was supposed driven by envy, having written one good book in his early twenties on his experiences in New Guinea, *Fear Drive My Feet* and then nothing more of any worth....⁴¹ And, finally, Ryan had lost touch with the world of academia, having vastly exaggerated both Clark’s influence on the work of contemporary ‘dry-as-dust’ historians of Australia and his place in the undergraduate curricular they set. He had significantly over-estimated Clark’s reputation among the historians of Australia and underestimated the number of hostile, if civil, reviews of his work that had been published during the past thirty years.⁴²

These are a fair summation of some of the reactions at the time and I hasten to add that much of Manne’s depiction is accurate. There was certainly great indignation in many quarters that Ryan’s attack was posthumous and that Dymphna had been so shocked and hurt by it all. Directly after the controversy broke, and in order to defuse the situation, Manne explained that Ryan had approached him in 1991 with the offer to write a critique of Clark, which Manne was emphatically interested in having. But Clark died a fortnight later so the idea was put on hold. Ryan’s eventual rant, then, was not a posthumous attack by design but something he had wanted to do during Clark’s lifetime. It was inevitable that the Clark family would be upset and Manne

⁴⁰ Manne, *A Political Memoir*, 269.

⁴¹ See Munro, *History Wars*, 124–26.

⁴² Manne, *A Political Memoir*, 271–72.

fended off criticisms that Ryan's essay should have been spiked on grounds that it was an 'attack on the dead':

Is it seriously being suggested that critical examination of a man who is regarded as Australia's foremost historian, and as one of its most important thinkers should be placed under a semi-permanent moratorium? Is it being suggested that only those who are enthusiastic about his work and thought should be permitted to speak?⁴³

I agree with him on this point, at least in principle. It is what Manne leaves out that's the bother. He does not engage with an important consideration at the time, namely that Ryan's attack was an egregious breach of publishing ethics. If Ryan thought that successive volumes of Clark's *History* were as bad as he said they were, then he should have told Clark and ended the project on grounds of protecting MUP's reputation and scholarly standing, which he crowed about in *Final Proof*.⁴⁴ Neither did he seek referees' reports, contrary to usual practice, which would have given him leverage in ridding himself of a difficult author. Clark offered more than once to terminate the project and each time was urgently talked out of it, with Ryan offering effusive flattery of his work.

I was not the one who revealed this for the first time. Ryan said as much in his first *Quadrant* article, although it was not a subject of discussion at the time, and much the correspondence is in plain sight in Roslyn Russell's edition of Clark's *Selected Letters*.⁴⁵ As Donald Horne (1921–2005) said at the time:

⁴³ Robert Manne, "A Holy Cow Called History," *Age* 1 September 1993: 16; republished as "Manning Clark, Peter Ryan and Us," *Quadrant* 37, no. 10 (October 1993): 2–3.

⁴⁴ Ryan, *Final Proof*, 29, 33, 65–67.

⁴⁵ Roslyn Russell (ed.), *Ever, Manning: Selected Letters of Manning Clark, 1938–1991* (Allen & Unwin, 2008), 230, 262, 270, 277–78; Ryan, *Lines of Fire*, 194; Munro, *History Wars*, 50–54.

I think it is absolutely disgusting that Peter Ryan was at MUP for that whole period and did not express [his negative] views to Manning Clark directly at the time. Here is a man who was publishing Manning Clark for 30 [should be 25] years and apparently did not have any honest conversations with him.⁴⁶

We have the spectacle of Ryan holding out the hand of long-standing friendship and professional probity but lacking either the courage or the candour—or both—to confront Clark about the quality of his work. Quite simply, MUP needed the revenue that the sales of Clark's *History* would generate – a 'tidy little earner' as Ryan later described it. Clark's son Andrew, a senior journalist, made no attempt to play down the situation, correctly pointing out that Ryan's previous comments about his father's work 'bore no relation to the 'Quadrant' attack,' meaning that:

Only two conclusions are possible—either Mr Ryan is a hypocrite, or a bitter jealous, old man. In any event, as my father passed away more than two years ago and Mr Ryan had plenty of time to make comments while he was alive, I regard this as the outburst of an opportunistic, cowardly and graceless man.⁴⁷

None of this appears in Manne's *Political Memoir*. Instead, he is obsessed by the notion that Ryan showed incredible bravery in chopping a "tall poppy" down to size in the full knowledge that he would incur the wrath of Clark's cheer squad: he was 'one of the bravest men I knew', asserts Manne.⁴⁸ This judgment is based on Ryan's distinguished war record but the latter's lack of candour with Clark indicates

⁴⁶ Quoted in Munro, *History Wars*, 60. This was a common refrain at the time from both sides of politics. On the Left, Brian Matthews, who was writing a biography of Clark, pointed out that Ryan "never did satisfactorily answer the question of why he blew the whistle so late" (Munro, *History Wars*, 124). On the Right, Gerard Henderson rebuked Ryan for not speaking out much earlier: "Welcome aboard Peter—but where were you when we needed you?" (Munro, *History Wars*, 39).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁸ Manne, *A Political Memoir*, 272.

something different. As others have argued, physical courage and moral courage are not necessarily one and the same.⁴⁹ In any case, if Ryan is to be believed, he was largely unconcerned about the inevitable reaction. As he said in 1995: 'It didn't trouble me much because when I reflected [about my critics] I thought yes ... yes, you have been getting pretty wishy-washy a bit of late, and you've been a professional for 30 years and you've written f...-all, and said f...-all and probably done f...-all work, too.'⁵⁰

Another measure of Ryan's bravery, by Manne's reckoning, was his puerile offer of a fistfight with Stuart Macintyre when the latter imputed that he was a coward:

It is not an accusation I often face and I cannot recall, offhand, recall the name of any survivor. If Macintyre means that it does not take much courage to face a yapping pack of briefly woken-up Australian historians, he may be right. If he means something else, he is invited to stand within arm's reach the next time he says it.⁵¹

What neither Ryan or Manne come clean that Ryan steadfastly refused to debate or discuss his *Quadrant* intervention with anyone, Macintyre included, on radio or television.⁵² He implausibly claimed that that 'hardly anyone was prepared to sit down [at the time] and have a face-to-face argument—even a shouting match, if they had wanted'.⁵³ Yet his refusal to actually confront his critics is hardly the hallmark of bravery and courage, or honesty for that matter, one would think.

⁴⁹ McQueen, *Suspect History*, 129.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Munro, *History Wars*, 133.

⁵¹ Ryan, *Lines of Fire*, 216.

⁵² Macintyre and Clark, *The History Wars*, 226.

⁵³ Quoted in Munro, *History Wars*, 42.

Another implausible claim by Manne is his underlying motivation in publishing Ryan being to encourage much-needed debate on the work of one of Australia's most prominent thinkers. Nothing could have been *less* calculated to generate fruitful discussion, given the atmosphere of the time, together with the pugnacity and incivility of Ryan's replies to his critics—while at the same time he insisted that his criticisms of Clark 'nowhere transgresse[d] propriety' and were 'politely phrased'. Ryan's polarising interventions achieved nothing in the public domain apart from contributing to the deterioration of national debate. It was outright *ad hominem*, as testified by the sampling of his retorts already provided. Manne's attitude was that *ad hominem* was of 'no account'⁵⁴ but how *ad hominem* can form the basis of rational debate eludes me. Ryan had his virtues—one of which was his resourcefulness—but restraint was not one of them.

Ironically, the most incriminating evidence about Ryan comes from his own papers and his biography. There is the matter of Ryan stating that he inherited a contract to publish as many volumes as Clark cared to write when in fact a contract was drawn up by Ryan in 1963, the year after the appearance of Volume One of the *History*. Ryan makes a big deal of the disinformation, which he spread at the time and repeated in his autobiography, that his hands were tied by a contract entered into before he arrived at MUP. It places a quite inaccurate construction on the events that followed, and I am disinclined to believe that Ryan made an honest mistake.⁵⁵

Another case of where Ryan deliberately directs attention away from the truth is in donning the garb of martyrdom and depicting himself as the victim of serial abuse from 'the loquacious Left' following his initial attack on Clark. What he avoided

⁵⁴ Cameron Forbes, "The Men who Wrinkled History's Page," *Weekend Australian* 28–29 August 1993: 4; Robert Manne, "A Holy Cow Called History," *Age* 1 September 1993: 16.

⁵⁵ Ryan, *Lines of Fire*, 180; Ryan, *Final Proof*, 30–31; Munro, *History Wars*, 47–48.

mentioning—and what his papers reveal—is the amount of wider public support he garnered; he was favoured with numerous letters of affirmation from friends and strangers alike.⁵⁶ These letters do not exhaust the field. Last year I stumbled across another, this time from Allan Fleming, a former National Librarian, which reads:

But what joy to say (seriously) that the pounding—no more delicate than that—the gentle kicking in the guts all the brave soldiers of Manning Clark have now received in their shambling retreat, or surrender, was satisfaction personified.⁵⁷

If nothing else, this statement reveals the depth of anti-Clark feeling in conservative circles. Again, Ryan's duplicity—in this case the cover-up concerning the moral support he received—makes an appreciable difference to the unfolding narrative.

Now we come to my 'imperceptive' assessment of Ryan's motives in attacking his best-selling author.⁵⁸ In the mix was resentment (the trouble Clark gave him as an author), jealousy (the extent of Clark's public stature compared to his), growing political differences as Ryan swung to the Right after 1975, not to mention outright vindictiveness. There was also Ryan's need for notice and notoriety. He was a public figure via the print media, writing columns and book reviews. These public interventions were integral to his being. But in 1993, he lost his coveted by-line column in the *Melbourne Age* following potentially libellous statements about the prime minister and now he was an outcast—a prophet without a pulpit.⁵⁹ At that point he revisited writing about Manning Clark, and he read Robert Manne correctly. Not

⁵⁶ I quoted from some of these letters in *History Wars*, 43–44.

⁵⁷ Fleming to Ryan, 10 October 1994, Papers of A.P. Fleming, National Library of Australia, MS 9862, Series 15, Box 25, Folder 14. Ryan's eulogy of Fleming is "The Man Who Bested Rommel (and Lionel Murphy)," *Quadrant* 58, no. 1–2 (January–February 2014): 110–12.

⁵⁸ See Munro, *History Wars*, 119–33.

⁵⁹ Tidey, *Ryan's Luck*, 102–04.

only was his offering on Clark eagerly accepted but soon after he became a *Quadrant* columnist. There is no smoking gun but seems reasonable to suggest that he was angling for this all along. A further consideration is that Ryan had to atone for publishing Clark's *History* and for once being a man of the Left. I was mistaken in suggesting—more than suggesting, in fact—that Ryan was indifferent to what people thought of him. He didn't give a tinker's cuss about his enemies, but it was different story with people whose approbation he valued.⁶⁰

There is a postscript. As I said, Manne and I struck up a cordial and constructive correspondence which I value but our *entente cordiale* did not survive the test of time. Perhaps it was not meant to last. I was asked to review *A Political Memoir* and did so positively enough, I thought.⁶¹ Manne was not pleased with the result and sent a disobliging e-mail accusing me of all manner of perfidy. It was impressive as dummy spits go but only served to add weight to David Cannadine's contention that such retorts are not 'a sensible or grown-up way to respond to being critically reviewed.'⁶² Manne had several gripes and his parting shot was 'I am exceptionally disappointed in you; I was wrong to trust in your integrity as a scholar.'⁶³ A measure of my fall from grace was Manne's initial 'unqualified praise for [my] tremendous scholarship'⁶⁴ being downgraded to my book being an 'extended slender essay'. *History Wars* is indeed a slender 140-or-so pages of actual text but Manne meant the word in a different sense. But as Manne himself has said, ad hominem is 'of no account.'

⁶⁰ See Ryan to Max Suich, 23 August 1993, Papers of Peter Ryan, National Library of Australia, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 10.

⁶¹ The review appeared in *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 71, no. 3 (2025): 542–43.

⁶² David Cannadine, "On Reviewing—and Being Reviewed," *History Today* 49, no.3 (1999): 30–33; republished in Cannadine, *Making History Now and Then: Discoveries, Controversies and Explorations* 298–306 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 305.

⁶³ Manne, e-mail to author, 6 May 2025.

⁶⁴ Manne, e-mail to author, 10 March 2019.

One point of contention was his ‘astonishment’ that I had devoted so much of my review to our disagreements over the Ryan-Clark controversy. I felt I had every right to stick up for myself given that he and Stuart Kells, in their different ways, had bypassed my arguments, not to mention John Tidey largely taking Ryan’s assertions at face value. What had bothered me was Manne’s refusal to engage with my arguments and the evidence I presented: he is locked into his own version of events in the face of all evidence to the contrary. One cannot conduct a dialogue in such circumstances so I will leave it at that. In any case it will be obvious that Manne and I have different views on Peter Ryan, with Manne seeing him as courageous and altruistic in ‘exposing’ Clark whereas I regard Ryan as conniving and duplicitous, and most definitely not ‘a stickler for truth.’ He was hardly the brave and principled figment of Manne’s imagination but instead, as Andrew Clark stated at the time, ‘an opportunistic, cowardly and graceless man.’

Coda: ‘Not all of me shall die’

There is a gastro pub one house down from the apartment block where I live in Wellington called Chapman-Taylor’s and the above quote, which is engraved in wood on one of the walls, comes from its namesake, the New Zealand architect James Chapman-Taylor (1878–1958). For the historian, the proposition can be reversed: ‘Most of me will die’. The same applies to *History Wars*. It is into its lifecycle but it will not last forever. Like any other history book, it is fated to fall by the wayside, a process accelerated by the fact that monographs keep appearing at an exponential rate. The paradox is glaring: all the effort goes into writing a book and getting it

published, all that striving for recognition and scholarly standing, and ultimately to no purpose—we fall prey to ‘posterity’s distain’.⁶⁵

To put it another way, 1990–1991 were bumper years for Australian historians’ deaths, and for those years a single issue of the *Australian Historical Association Bulletin* carried obituaries to Noel Butlin, Manning Clark, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Laurie Gardiner, and John La Nauze (all but Butlin had University of Melbourne connections, incidentally).⁶⁶ Apart from Manning Clark, I wonder how familiar these names and their books are with readers of this journal, apart from septuagenarians like myself. Even then we may draw a blank.

Of course, a historian’s afterlife may be perpetuated by being the subject of a biography and particularly by involvement in extra-curricular activities which might lead to gaining a broader public reputation, whether through political activism, being a public intellectual or cultural critic, or by participating in the affairs of state. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. is an obvious case in point,⁶⁷ as is Manning Clark after 1975. By this reckoning, Manne might ultimately be remembered, at least to some, for shifting from being an arch right-winger to thinking of himself as the left-wing conscience of Australia. Given Manne’s sustained involvement in the great issues of the day, I am certain that his legacy will extend well beyond that.

History Wars is out and about and seemingly in good health but I am under no illusions that the book (and its author) will eventually fade away; by how much and how soon I cannot say. Unlike some of my colleagues who fret about their legacy, I am like Eric Hobsbawm in being largely unconcerned that ‘[o]bsolescence is the

⁶⁵ The phrase is Ian Hamilton’s, *Against Oblivion: Some Lives of the Twentieth Century Poets* (Penguin Books, 2003), 13.

⁶⁶ *Australian Historical Association Bulletin*, 66–67 (1991): 78–89.

⁶⁷ Richard Aldous, *Schlesinger: The Imperial Historian* (W.W. Norton, 2017).

unavoidable fate of the historian.’⁶⁸ I am concerned to live in the present and *History Wars* is my favourite of the books that I have authored or co-authored, even if it has involved being caught up in an unseemly squabble. I feel that I got the broad outlines right, especially with regard to Peter Ryan – which leads me to conclude that continuing to defend Ryan as principled and morally courageous ‘stickler for the facts’ lies somewhere between a lost cause and a fool’s errand.

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⁶⁸ Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* (Little, Brown 2019), 659.

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