

A Premature Post-Mortem?

Keith Windshuttle, The Killing of History: How a discipline is being murdered by literary critics and social theorists, Macleay Press, Sydney, 1994

Reviewed by Graeme Davison

Keith Windshuttle is a worried man. He is not the only middle-aged academic historian to take fright at the rapid advance of post-modernism, deconstruction and other varieties of so-called 'critical theory' or to deplore the ground increasingly surrendered to them by traditional disciplines such as history. Tune into the common room gossip of your local history department and you may detect a widening rift between the young and untenured who welcome the new knowledge, and their older colleagues who mutter against it. Like the disciples of Marcuse, Althusser and Poulantzas 20 years ago, 'the theoretical and literary interlopers' who, according to Windshuttle's lurid vision, 'are now so hungrily stalking the corridors', know well how a whiff of Parisian theory can discomfit the tenured and complacent.

It is time that someone took a hard critical look at the state of history in the 1990s, and *The Killing of History*, despite its slightly hysterical title, is a welcome counterblast to some fashionable extremities. Windshuttle writes as an avowed positivist and empiricist. Under the influence of literary and cultural theorists, he alleges, historians have gradually dissolved the distinction between history and fiction, succumbing instead to a relativistic belief that the past is unknowable and that 'all we have is texts'. According to the 'new humanities', claims to knowledge of the past are understood merely as statements from differing power positions. Rather than being something discovered, the past becomes something invented. Closely allied to this tendency are post-modernist or post-historicist claims of an 'end of history', a proposition which Windshuttle interprets — rightly, I believe — as a new variant of Nietzschean pessimism to which former historicists, such as disenchanted Marxists, are especially prone.

How then did the historical enterprise go off the rails? Windshuttle implies that the rot set in only recently. For example, he approves of the social history movement of the 1960s and 1970s 'which added a valuable new dimension and insight to the field' (p.223). Yet many of the tendencies he deplores in the 1990s were apparent 20 years ago. Reflection on the sociology of historical knowledge, radical questioning of the relationship between past and present, hermeneutics and other forms of textual criticism, have all been part of historical discourse at least since the foundation of the Annales School in the late 1920s, if not longer. The history Windshuttle seeks to rescue — a history founded on fact and apparently innocent of theory — has been dying for some time. There is thus a Rip van Winkle quality about some of his polemic. It is therefore as though he had suddenly woken up only to find himself far down the slippery slide of relativism and had decided that the only remedy was to start again at the top.

The Killing of History consists largely of a series of case-studies, some of internationally celebrated theorists or historians such as Michel Foucault, Hayden White, Simon Schama and Francis Fukuyama, others of prominent Australian historians or cultural theorists who have embraced the new style. These include two of the so-called 'Melbourne group' of cultural historians — Greg Denning, author of *Mr Bligh's Bad Language*, and Inga Clendinnen, author of *Aztecs* — as well as Paul Carter, author of *The Road to Botany Bay*. Some of these writers would be surprised to find themselves in the same boat. How much common ground is to be found, for example, between the anarchist Foucault and the liberal Fukuyama? That they *are* so different is perhaps an indication of just how much of what had been considered common ground between historians and theorists Windshuttle now seeks to reclaim.

While theory is Windshuttle's main target, his mode of argument is not mainly theoretical, but relentlessly empirical. In chapter after chapter he seeks to show that the historians, led astray by theory, simply got it wrong. His view of scholarly debate is a rather gladiatorial one, in which good historians armed with facts defeat bad ones misled by theory. Thus Clendinnen's symbolic account of human sacrifice among the Aztec is counterposed to a more traditional one based on military power relations; Denning's dramaturgical account of the Bligh Mutiny and the death of Captain Cook is allegedly 'quickly reduced to ruins' by Obeyesekere's account of power relations between European and indigenous peoples; Foucault's 'archaeologies' of the prison, the asylum and clinic are exploded by the many accusations of factual inaccuracy that have been brought against him (no doubt justly). Despite Windshuttle's general objection to reductionist explanations, his choice of borrowed critiques suggests that so far from being entirely innocent of theory, he has some strong theoretical predispositions of his own. The obverse of his scepticism towards symbolic or 'deep' anthropological explanations is a kind of Hobbesian realism, a preference for explanations in terms of military power or *Realpolitik*.

In his penultimate chapter Windshuttle proceeds by way of a critique of Kuhn, Popper and other philosophers of science to a defence of induction as the proper and distinctive method of the historian. With the late David Stove, from whom he borrows much of this, he draws a sharp (some would say too sharp) distinction between accounts of what scientists actually do and what they ought to do, and a very thin line (I would say too thin) between what scientists do and what historians who have to deal with human subjectivity can and ought to do. Here as throughout the book Windshuttle contrasts a conception of historical knowledge, based on inductive reasoning, which is objective and certain, with another conception, based on critical theory, which is speculative and unreliable. However, I noticed that Windshuttle tends persistently to slide from statements about the 'objectivity' of historical 'documents' or (what is not quite the same thing) historical 'evidence' to statements about an 'objective' or 'certain' knowledge of 'the past'. It would take more space than is available here to summarise the many objections that philosophers and historians, since Ranke, have raised against such a radical empiricism. The essential point is not that historians cannot, at least in some sense, 'know the past', or that we have 'nothing but texts' — both of which positions I would certainly reject — but that we have to take more seriously

than Windshuttle does how human subjectivity influences the ways in which the past is made present to us.

A deconstructionist who picked up *The Killing of History* would probably highlight the author's persistent resort to metaphors of territorial conflict. Windshuttle's is a simplified view of the historiographical landscape in which the many shades of epistemological difference among social historians collapse in the face of a looming battle for historical objectivity. Rather than exploring shades of difference between or within works, Windshuttle invariably sees them as chinks in an enemy's armour. Rather than seeking to discover what insights he can take from a flawed work, he sees each factual error as a reason to condemn the whole.

Almost 20 years ago I obtained a copy of Foucault's *Birth of the Clinic*, then newly translated into English. I was working at the time on the history of early 19th-century social inquiry and trying to understand the often complex social and intellectual connections between contemporary religion, medicine, political economy and social statistics. Foucault's book captivated me. Here, it seemed, were ways of seeing the subject anew, of suggesting connections between otherwise discrete discourses. It took me no time at all to see that Foucault's documentation was thin and that his periodisation was suspiciously formalistic. I was baffled by his refusal to confront what seemed the basic issue of explaining the great epistemic discontinuities he claimed to observe. Yet by suggesting fertile questions, *The Birth of the Clinic* became an important ingredient in the work I published a few years later. Over the following years I have read most of Foucault's works as they have appeared in English, and I have been instructed by the several biographies that have appeared since his death. I am no closer to becoming a Foucaultian than I was at the beginning. I am irritated by his deliberate opacity, bemused by his inconsistencies, sceptical of his concept of power, repelled by his nihilism. But like most historians my approach to theory is cheerfully, if critically, eclectic, and if I find something useful or instructive in Foucault (or Hayden White, or even Fukuyama) I don't feel obliged to buy the whole package.

There are indeed serious issues of truth and error, academic and disciplinary integrity at stake in the debates between literary theorists and historians. It's not so long since I witnessed a chilling exchange between one enthusiastic advocate of 'the new humanities' and a fellow historian. 'I don't know whether critical theory will be alive and well in the year 2000', my friend rashly suggested, 'but I'm sure history will be.' 'Nonsense', the critical theorist replied, 'we will bury you'. Rumours of the death of history are no doubt part of the scare tactics of what we might better call 'the new anti-humanities'. But even if a few dogmatists have territorial ambitions, or even lethal intentions, that is no reason why historians should take to the bunkers. To do so would be to forsake an important source of intellectual stimulus and to capitulate to the very apocalyptic sense of history that *The Killing of History*, in some of its better passages, seeks to controvert.

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