

Review by Lyndon Megarrity

The Art of Time Travel

Currently the W K Hancock Professor of History at Australian National University, Tom Griffiths has reflected deeply over the years on the nature of history and its meaning. *The Art of Time Travel* is Griffiths's tribute to the historians that have moved him, shaped him and inspired him, and skilfully highlights how different perspectives bring different strengths and challenges to understanding and working with the past.

Each chapter revolves around a specific historian, often someone who Griffiths has known personally as a colleague or student. The author's unspoken definition of an historian is a somewhat generous one—people whose work involves reflection and understanding of history, such as the novelist and archaeologist, are included in Griffiths's historiographical survey.

The Art of Time Travel stresses the importance of imagination in the development of historical consciousness. Griffiths agrees with historian Keith Hancock, who was adamant that “no imagination” meant “no history.” Certainly, without the imagination to wonder what takes place in the gaps in our historical knowledge, the world of scholarship would be a poorer place. The author's most successful study is of the late historian Greg Denning, whose attempts to cultivate the creative imagination and collegiality of his students could be uplifting or unsettling, depending on the learning preferences of the student. “Don't rail against the limits,” Denning advised his fellow scholars. “Discover them, play with them, extend them.”

The author sustains the reader's interest by highlighting the tensions inherent in the pursuit of history that can create controversy and divisiveness. For example, John Mulvaney as an archaeologist and prehistorian was a crucial figure in uncovering the significance of the pre-European past, yet his belief that the past belonged to all clashed sharply with some modern Aboriginal people's ideas of exclusive heritage ownership.

Griffiths also explores the blurring of the lines between fiction and history. Is it possible for a fiction writer to capture the past more fully through dramatisation than through empirical fact alone? The author leaves the question wide open, and offers Kate Grenville's

reflections on writing her historical novel *The Secret River*: “I didn’t have to approach the past in a forensic frame of mind. I could *experience* the past—as if it were happening here and now.” Griffiths also highlights the contribution of the novelist Eleanor Dark. Her narrative on early European settlement encouraged a generation of readers (and later TV viewers) to become more aware of Aboriginal-European relations in that pivotal early phase.

However, there are some missed opportunities. The author’s unease with key parts of Geoffrey Blainey’s historical worldview overshadows his analysis of this important historian’s many strengths, including Blainey’s capacity to bring forgotten aspects of yesteryear into sharper focus and his rare ability to explain economic and technical matters while sustaining a lively text. Griffiths also has a tendency to become overly discursive: at times he strays from the focus of his individual chapter (i.e. a specific historian) and ends up telling readers so much about related ideas, trends and fellow practitioners that there is not enough biography to develop an informed impression of each chapter’s featured historian.

More biographical detail would certainly have been useful in the case of his study of Henry Reynolds. Griffiths uncritically accepts the notion of 1960s Townsville as the racist city that helped inspire Reynolds’ study of European-Indigenous relations on the frontier. So little, meaningful history has been written about Townsville since World War Two that this concept of “special” North Queensland racism in comparison with the South is a little questionable.

Nevertheless, if a university student was to ask me about which works on historiography were worth reading, I would definitely recommend this book. It is a substantial view of the historian’s craft by a leading historian, and is full of insights that will inspire teachers and their students. I will leave the final word to Griffiths:

History is essential to meaning and identity and it is a powerful disciplinary tool in the search for truth ... No matter how often we visit the past, it always surprises us ... in the course of our quest we find that we, too, have changed.

***The Art of Time Travel: Historians and their Craft* by Tom Griffiths. Carlton: Black Inc., 2016. ISBN 9781863958561. RRP \$34.99, pp. 336.**