



Affect in the archive: trauma, grief, delight and texts. Some personal reflections

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ABSTRACT

Historians, as users of archives, often discuss the thrill and emotion of their ‘discoveries’. We can form romantic attachments or be repulsed across the decades. Archives containing the physical remains of the past can transport us, we can move beyond the here and now. Before the Museum of Melbourne digitised Alfred Howitt’s correspondence, I once opened a letter written to him on classic nineteenth-century blued paper. As I pulled the missive from its envelope, I could smell tobacco smoke. I was immediately in the room with him. Recently, after completing an article on the topic of frontier violence, my co-author and I both described a feeling of stress and trauma that came from reading colonial records of ‘skirmishes’ and ‘dispersals’. In this paper, I want to reflect on the experience of Affect in the archive.

KEYWORDS

Affect; archives; grief; trauma

Affect archives and the origins of a researcher

This paper derives from a talk given as the 2017 Whyte lecture. I was keen to maintain some of the conversational style and discursive nature. Every archive-based historian has stories of the thrill of the archive. The eminent historian and writer Greg Denning reflected that time spent examining archival sources was ‘rewarded with a sensitivity that comes in no other way’.¹ Uncovering some long-forgotten secret; solving a mystery; realising a connection that no one had previously noticed; or just establishing relationships between historical figures via their archival signatures and networks. Archival researchers read across, and against the grain, taking in peripheral notes, and even marginalia. I recall the delight I experienced at the British Library when reading a copy of a book that had belonged to Joseph Banks. The book concerned a sealing voyage in the Southern Pacific in the last years of the eighteenth century,² and I realised Bank’s marginalia related to the colonisation of Australia. I could literally see his thinking about how to fit out ships for the long voyage south. He was considering somewhat ludicrously if Galapagos tortoises might be kept on ships in pens and harvested for fresh meat. Fortunately for the crew and the tortoises he quickly gave up this idea.

This paper is a personal reflection on a life in archives, I hope it is not self-indulgent, nor implies a sense of self-importance, rather I hope to capture some of the experiences that I and others have had, immersed in the often-dusty tomes that make up our subject areas.

A series of fortunate accidents

In the 1980s, in what I regard now as another life, I was working in Nicholson Street, North Fitzroy in a once grand Edwardian house that had been converted into a health facility. My office was on the first floor in a huge and largely un-renovated room. The balcony easily accessible from this room had been declared unsafe and, although today it is difficult to imagine such a thing, we were able to occupy the building, provided we did not venture out on to the balcony. Late one Friday afternoon as the light streamed in through the very dirty windows and dust fairies danced in the afternoon beams I noticed a strange piece of ribbon poking between two floor boards. It was all but invisible but for the afternoon sun catching it. I knelt down to investigate and I tugged at the ribbon, it was quite firmly stuck and then as I ran my hand along the floor board to my absolute shock a small recessed hole beneath the floor was revealed.

This was in the days before mobile phones so I have no photos, no Twitter or Instagram, just my memories of this moment. I reached into the space and found a small and beautiful book of poetry. It was inscribed to 'Miss E Malcolm, 27 April 1863, from A Friend'. Who was Miss E Malcolm, why was the book given to her anonymously? Was 'A Friend' a man or was it a woman? And why was a book inscribed in 1863 hidden in the floor of a house I later discovered was built in 1907 for a Dr John McNerney and his family.

My interest was piqued and my life as an (at that stage amateur) historian was born. I researched the house, built for a local doctor, and I discovered he was married to a woman named Edith who I surmised may well have been Edith Malcolm. Within months (though not a direct consequence of my discovery) I had abandoned my previous career and I was a full-time Arts Degree student at La Trobe University. I had been bitten by the bug and I intended dedicating my life to studying the past.

Over the past three decades whenever I have the inclination I have tried to recreate the story of Miss Malcolm. Perusing shipping records, I determined she arrived in Australia in the 1880s as a widow, living first in Coburg, then, after marrying the doctor, they moved to North Fitzroy into the house they shared with his surgery. Throughout her life she held on to the book of poetry, hiding it beneath the floor boards, probably underneath a rug, away from the eyes of her husband and, later, her children. Pressed between the pages were dried flowers, and sprigs of fern, perhaps mementos of country walks or garden visits. Clearly, Edith never forgot her friend and I assume after her death, the sale of the house, its purchase by the Victorian Government, its renovation as a health service office, silently beneath the floor boards, her modest little book of Thomson and Gray poetry sat and waited for one sunny, dusty afternoon and a nosey potential historian to come along.

As an archival historian, I have encountered myriad emotions in archives, libraries and museums. Although feeling and Affect are routinely used interchangeably, it is important not to confuse Affect with feelings and emotions.³ As a working definition, I find Brian Massumi's explanation of Affect in his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* most illuminating. He notes that Affect is not a personal feeling. Feelings are *personal* and *biographical*, emotions are *social* and Affects are *prepersonal*.⁴ The sort of archival

affect I am interested in works at multiple levels. Most researchers I know have, from time to time, reflected on the visceral and embodied. For many Aboriginal researchers, working in an archive and encountering what they regard as both racist and incorrect observations can be traumatising and distressing. Many archives and libraries now issue warnings that their collections carry the possibility of causing distress. The Affects and emotions I cover in this paper range from romantic love (or at the very least a crush), to trauma and horror, through to connection and belonging, and many others as well.

When I was researching my book *Roving Mariners* in various archives and libraries in New Zealand and Australia I came across one historical figure who came to play an important role in the narrative I wanted to craft.⁵ Tommy Chaseland, born in the first years of the nineteenth century, was the son of a convict and an un-named Aboriginal mother. Unusually he was raised by his father and his convict wife. Tommy grew to be a remarkable man, 6 feet 7 inches tall, strong, charismatic and adventurous. He left Australia on a whale ship, had a career as a sealer, sailor, whaler and navigator, before he settled in New Zealand where he married into a high-ranking Maori family in the South Islands; finally dying in old age on Stewart Island where many descendants still live.⁶ Tommy's archival signature was substantial and the longer I spent in his company, the more enamoured of him I became. I wrote several articles and book chapters on him and he became for me an important (albeit peripheral) figure.

Midway through my research, at a book launch I met the novelist Kate Grenville. We struck up a conversation. We talked about writing history, using archives and of course Affect. Kate's work had been controversially, and I suggest unfairly, criticised for not being history, when it is after all fiction.⁷ As we moved our way through the vagaries of being in the archives she mentioned she had read one of my articles on Chaseland. Suddenly with a knowing look on our faces, we realised that we were both a little bit in love with the same long-dead man.

Tommy Chaseland became Jack Langland in Kate's award-winning novel *Sarah Thornhill*.⁸ After travelling to Stewart Island and walking along the beaches that Tommy would have known and traversed Kate returned to Australia with two pebbles and two shells for me to keep as mementos. My archive of Chaseland now contains these tangible objects along with countless papers and digital records. 'Real' archives might find such an object difficult to catalogue, yet for me these are the perfect manifestation of an Affective engagement with history.

In their own words

As a nineteenth-century historian, I frequently encounter statements in archives that leave me breathless; these might be sentiments that are stunning in their audacity, or in their naiveté. In particular nineteenth-century sources can provide tremendous context for contemporary debates. The so-called history wars are a case in point.⁹ The history wars have embroiled historians in various debates that conservative commentators have inflicted on us over the past decade or so. Arguments about whether or not there was violence towards indigenous Australians, discussion of number and scales, anxiety over terms such as genocide and massacre often leave me perplexed. My understanding comes from an Affected reading of history, which comes from spending significant amounts of time in nineteenth-century archives where I encounter observers at the time making statements like this:

This country has been shamelessly stolen from the blacks ... In less than twenty years we have nearly swept them off the face of the earth. We have shot them down like dogs. In the guise of friendship, we have issued corrosive sublimate in their damper, and consigned whole tribes to the agonies of an excruciating death. We have made them drunkards, and infected them with disease, which has rotted the bones of their adults, and made few children as exist amongst them a sorrow and a torture from the very instant of their birth. We have made them outcasts on their own land, and are rapidly consigning them to entire annihilation.¹⁰

The archives often made available through the brilliant, and internationally significant, Trove contain not only copious evidence of the violence and dispossession, but also evidence of settlers who were horrified, surprisingly empathetic and prepared to speak out. Encountering these dissenting archival voices reassures us that there were indeed astute and sensitive 'men' among the early colonists just as there were genocidal racists.¹¹

We are by no means tainted with hypocritical pity for the 'poor blacks', but even [if] it were true that they are little better than 'ourang outangs' [*sic*] as the learned and honourable member for Sydney called them, it is not right that we should strive to keep them from rising above the level of their debasement. ... we contend that the extinction of the whole race by natural causes would not afford any matter of regret; but while we have them with us, we ought to show them justice. ... our opinion [is] that the extinction of the race is a matter of indifference.¹²

Researching this material can be emotionally taxing. It is difficult to read countless accounts of Aboriginal people being described in imperialistic terms, and their deaths normalised as merely a consequence of colonisation. In the American context archival scholars Anne J. Gilliland and Michelle Caswell note that 'legal, bureaucratic, historical and forensic notions of evidence ... often fall short in explaining the capacity of records and archives to motivate, inspire, anger, and traumatize'.¹³

Massacres and myth busting

This leads me to the recent work of Lyndall Ryan and her team on massacres. In July 2017, during NAIDOC week, at the Australian Historical Association's annual conference Professor Lyndall Ryan and her University of Newcastle team launched Massacre Map, an online resource documenting the massacre of Aboriginal people for the period 1788–1872. So far, they have only researched the eastern states of Australia, however they intend extending both the geographic and date ranges. Massacres are defined by the team as: having resulted in the deaths of six or more people; and, those killed would have made every effort to flee, hide or defend themselves, they were however relatively defenceless (that is, they may have been on foot and unarmed, while the attackers were mounted on horseback with guns). Most importantly, in order for a massacre to be included in this database, a significant and corroborative archive must exist. This must include a reasonable amount of information indicating that the massacre took place, and may include but is not limited to court proceedings, newspapers or oral accounts.¹⁴

While sitting riveted in the audience, I became deeply aware of the palpably painful work that had gone into developing this resource, little by little I felt physically sick. For the conference demonstration, the website's time line was set to automatic, and as it scrolled it started in 1787, of course the map was blank. However, as we moved through time the massacres began to flash across the screen, each one a flash of hideous violence involving the massacre of six or more people; first New South Wales, then Tasmania, Victoria and Queensland.

Unsurprisingly Ryan's work has provoked considerable interest with both the ABC and NITV running radio and television segments on it; while *The Guardian's* Calla Wahlquist observed that overall estimates of the number of deaths may be as high as 65,000 in Queensland alone.¹⁵ Here she was referring to the shocking research by Raymond Evans and Robert Ørsted-Jensen.¹⁶

The myth of peaceful conquest was forever shattered when in 1968, the anthropologist W E H Stanner referred to the 'great Australian silence'. This silence and mythologising included the failure of standard text books, such as Gordon Greenwood's *Australia: A Social and Political History*, to even refer to conflict on the frontier.¹⁷ As Stanner noted:

What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale.¹⁸

While immensely grateful that the work on massacres was becoming not merely known but broadly accepted, I reflected on how this careful archival research might have affected the research team.

Surveying the field

I wondered how Lyndall Ryan and her team had dealt with what I imagined to be unenviable pain, trauma and anguish as they ploughed through the archival evidence for massacres. This led me to ask, via email, 40 archival historian colleagues (20 men and 20 women) how they had encountered Affect, trauma and grief in the archive and how this may have influenced the way they practise history. I received 20 responses, 19 from women and 1 from a male colleague. The gender dynamics of this, admittedly non-random, survey, surprised me. I am certain that men experience Affect much as do women but perhaps their socialisation leads them to respond to it differently. Some of the responses are illustrative and make a valuable contribution to a reflection on the meaning of archival Affect. One of the scholars who has worked on the massacre research observed:

I think you understand how the archives are not just dead people talking, somehow, they become real people – some are ugly and some are truly enlightening. The pieces of paper and material objects hold a sense of time, place and purpose.¹⁹

She continued that, while they had received thousands of responses, fewer than 10 had been negative, noting that:

I am cautiously optimistic that there is a change in the broader public despite the pockets of far-right racists who will unfortunately continue to vomit out their vile slander. ... I hope to continue to be part of righting the wrongs of our past and so that we can address the issues we all face today, for both the original custodians of this land and others who have arrived recently.

Thus, it is clear that the trauma of working with such devastating materials can be for some ameliorated by the positive responses and possible changes it creates.

Another historian, not involved in Ryan's massacre research but a scholar of colonial frontiers and cross-cultural interactions, wrote to me.

This is such a rich topic – I [recall] feeling physically ill, heartsick, and in fact being unable to write for days (when I read the details of the Myall creek massacre and fate of the little girls, which is often omitted in accounts). I gave up for a while, and called into question whether I could or should write about this.

In a similar vein, a colleague working on New Zealand colonial history spoke of the assault she felt when she read:

blunt racism, and animalistic descriptions, [these impacted her in] quite physical terms. Last year, in published British Parliamentary papers, I came across descriptions of Maori people as being akin to dogs, needing to be kicked. This bluntly racialised and animalistic description made me feel sick, and frankly I was stunned, because I am 'used to' reading these descriptions applied to Aboriginal people and not Maori. The comparative element of my scholarship tends to hit me hardest.

For many of us, too, there is the great concern that the harrowing incidents we might find in the archives can have the capacity to re-traumatise contemporary Aboriginal people who are the descendants, relatives and custodians.

After recently completing an article on the topic of frontier violence in Australia and the Pacific, my co-author and I both described a feeling of stress that came from reading colonial records of 'skirmishes' and 'dispersals' and other euphemisms for murdering, dispossessing and removing Indigenous people. However, fortunately not all Affective encounters can be described as stressful. Working in the 1990s, prior to the digitisation of the correspondence of explorer, natural scientist and researcher of Aboriginal culture and social organisation, Alfred Howitt (1830–1908), at Melbourne Museum, I opened a letter one of his correspondents had written to him. The blue paper was fragile, even a little brittle, and it smelled strongly of pipe smoke. Such experiences are evocative and ensure that the archival historian feels a tangible and material connection to their subjects. As a senior historian observed in response to my questions:

my first frisson in the archives, ... was finding Governor George Arthur's signed marginal note on a letter from a settler in 1828. The ink smelt so fresh on the page that it was as if he had just taken his pen from the inkwell. It took very little imagination to see him writing the comments at his desk. I still love musty archives. They certainly excite the imagination. By comparison all this modern digital stuff is like playing with plastic.

Archives can be tactile, visceral, aural and olfactory, something that is certainly reduced when the physical becomes digital. While the importance of digitising cannot be undervalued there is much to debate beyond the relatively simple technical process of 'photographing' or scanning the text.

Affect in the archive is both a privilege and an occupational hazard for historians. Archives and other collecting institutions thankfully still allow bona fide researchers access to the hard-copy originals, without which the archival experience is much diminished.

Endnotes

1. Greg Denning, *Beach Crossings: Voyaging Across Time, Cultures and Self*, Melbourne University Publishing, Carlton, 2004, p. 55.
2. The book was Amasa Delano, *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres*, E. G. House, London, 1817. Joseph Banks's substantial personal library was donated to the British Library.
3. I have capitalised Affect in the hope that the reader will see this as emphasising that I am very deliberately using the term both as a verb, meaning to influence something, and indeed as a noun meaning a thing of influence, contra *effect* for the something that was influenced.
4. Brian Massumi, 'Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements', in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, p. xvi.

- See also Eric Shouse, 'Feeling, Emotion, Affect', *M/C Journal*, vol. 8, no. 6, 2005, available at <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php>, accessed 15 March 2018.
5. Lynette Russell, *Roving Mariners: Australian Aboriginal Whalers and Sealers in the Southern Oceans, 1790–1870*, SUNY, New York, 2012.
 6. *ibid.*, Chapter 3.
 7. Inga Clendinnen, 'The History Question: Who Owns The Past?' *Quarterly Essay*, vol. 23, Black Ink, Melbourne, 2006; Mark McKenna, 'Imagination and History', *Teaching History*, vol. 42, no. 1, March 2008, pp. 7–10.
 8. Kate Grenville, *Sarah Thornhill*, Text, Melbourne, 2014.
 9. Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2003; A. Dirk Moses, 'Moving the Genocide Debate Beyond the History Wars', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2008, pp. 248–70; Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Macleay Press, Sydney, 2002.
 10. Editorial, *The Argus*, 17 March 1856.
 11. I do not have room to explore the gendered nature of nineteenth-century observations, beyond noting that the overwhelming majority of writers corresponding with newspapers in this era were men.
 12. *Geelong Advertiser*, Thursday 4 July 1844.
 13. Anne J Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, 'Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined', *Archival Science*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2016, pp. 53–75; Antoinette Burton (ed.), *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2003.
 14. Colonial Frontier Massacres in Eastern Australia, 1788–1872, available at <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/>, accessed 10 September 2017.
 15. Calla Wahlquist, 'Map of massacres of Indigenous people reveals untold history of Australia, painted in blood', 5 July 2017, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/jul/05/map-of-massacres-of-indigenous-people-reveal-untold-history-of-australia-painted-in-blood>, accessed 10 September 2017.
 16. Raymond Evans and Robert Ørsted-Jensen, "'I Cannot Say the Numbers That Were Killed': Assessing Violent Mortality on the Queensland Frontier", paper delivered at The Australian Historical Association 33rd Annual Conference, The University of Queensland, 7–11 July 2014, available at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2467836, accessed 10 September 2017.
 17. Gordon Greenwood, *Australia: A Social and Political History*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1955.
 18. W E H Stanner, *After the Dreaming*, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, 1969, p. 25.
 19. In keeping with my agreement with those who responded to my questions, I will keep their responses anonymous.

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Notes on contributor

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