

L I M I N A *History in Practice*

History in the Marketplace: Siobhan McHugh on Surviving as a Freelance Historian

Siobhan McHugh is an award-winning writer and broadcaster specialising in Australian social history. She is the author of four books, including The Snowy: The People behind the Power, which won the New South Wales State Literary Award for Non-fiction and was the basis for an ABC radio and television documentary; Minefields and Miniskirts, documenting the role of Australian women in the Vietnam War; Cottoning On, about the New South Wales cotton industry; and Shelter from the Storm, featuring interviews with tenants in public housing. McHugh has also produced radio and television documentaries, including the five-part series for television, The Irish Empire, and she writes for the Australian magazine and the Irish Times. Her latest project is due for publication in 2002, with the proposed title 'Rebels to Rulers: Stories of Irish Australia'. In April 2000, McHugh was in Perth to deliver the Mary Durack Memorial Lecture and while there, took time to speak with Judy Skene about the pressures facing a freelance historian.

Siobhan, you are known as a social historian but I wondered if you had any formal training in history?

No, I have a degree in science, which I find very useful in dealing with history because it helps me to be able to deal with large amounts of information and organise it systematically, and that helps me hone the writing I do. I just fell into writing social history because of an interest in people and a fascination with the human condition. I started in Ireland, looking at immigrant experiences and the changes that were happening in the 1960s, which were very turbulent times. From that, I developed a passion for oral history, because it's so accessible. You've got people right there and you've got that direct connection which is what really sparks me.

Did that interest develop through your work in radio or did it lead you into radio?

No, it developed through my work in radio. The very first radio program I ever made when I was a cadet producer in Ireland was on immigration, oddly enough, since we are a nation of emigrants and until recently we

haven't experienced the phenomena of immigration in Ireland. There were literally only 13 000 people of other nationalities living in Ireland and I was curious as to how they lived. So I went around interviewing black Africa students about racism, and a German who spoke with a completely Irish accent in the west of Ireland. I suppose I was always curious about people on the margins, about people who didn't quite fit the norm.

So that interest has led you into researching, writing, and broadcasting?

It is a combination of the doggedness of when you get a hold of a good story, and it is about telling stories as well as about telling history, about good yarns. When I am working on something, I discuss it with taxi drivers and if the taxi driver's eyes glaze over, I know I've got a problem. Every time I opened my mouth about the Snowy in a taxi, the taxi driver would have 5 stories, or know someone who worked there and I knew I was really at the heart of something very close to the Australian psyche, because I was getting such a strong response. It was the same with the Irish program (*The Irish Empire*) but something like the cotton industry project was a more specialist area.

Siobhan, you are in Perth as the keynote speaker at an academic conference. Do you find there is a tension between yourself as more of a social commentator and academic historians?

Yes, though I think it's a very broad relationship. On the one hand, I have got great respect for the knowledge certain academics have but I think there is definitely a kind of a snobbery in some quarters that tends to view the work that I do as low-brow. Or, maybe because I'm popular, it's just sour grapes, because my books actually sell and because I get media attention. People seem to think it's somehow a bit down market. And it's not just me, there are other people who have done marvellous work on social history, but we are not quite the thing. I had an example of this attitude that I was quite outraged by, concerning my work on Australian women in the Vietnam war. I do primary research. With the women in the Vietnam war, it took a long time to find those women. Women are particularly hard to trace because they marry and change their names. I had about 200 women whom I consulted, in one way or another; I think about 50 were what I would call female veterans. About a year after the book had come out, there was an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, an interview with an academic, who had published some work on post-traumatic stress disorder and the impact on the family and there were several names in there that were the same people I'd interviewed. The journalist said that this was the first work that has ever been done on women and families. So I rang up and said, 'look, actually it isn't. There's my book, which was published a year ago and one part of it is devoted to this topic.' I was told by the editor of the section of the *Sydney Morning Herald* that what I had done cannot be considered research because it is only research if it emanates

from a university. And I said, 'I think that is elitist nonsense'. I still believe that. In fact, my only recourse in the end was to write a letter to the paper and take a punt on getting it published and I did. When I contacted the academic, she said that my book was her source for all the people she spoke to. I asked if she mentioned that to the journalist and she said, 'No, why should I?'

I said that I thought that she was appropriating my research without acknowledgment, and she again had this very condescending attitude that I was just a writer. I wasn't an academic.

That sounds close to plagiarism.

I have had a couple of instances of that and that's why in some circles I have been very scathing of that attitude by academics. I had another experience with the cotton book. My interest in the cotton industry started because I was commissioned by the New South Wales Department of Water Resources to do some oral history work for them on their employees' histories. I came across the cotton story and I realised that this was an interesting story. As soon as I realised how politically fraught it was, because there were all these issues about irrigation, and destroying the Murray-Darling river, and pesticide use, I realised that I would have to not only be independent, but be perceived to be independent in order to write a credible book. So I waived my commission of \$15 000, which is a lot of money when you are a freelance writer, and I went out and did this book under my own steam. In the foreword, I thanked the Department of Water Resources and said that this was how I had got the idea. That book ended up being shortlisted for the first year of the New South Wales' Premier's History Prize. I couldn't afford to go to the dinner because it was \$75, and when I saw the judges' report, to my absolute horror, they described my book as a 'commissioned work'. The tone of the report was, 'what a good history for a commissioned work'. And it hadn't been commissioned. These were academic historians, who made a judgement, from my thanking the Department, to assuming the work was commissioned. I felt that they could not have viewed the book in the proper light if they were assuming it was a commissioned work. I thought they should have checked, if they had any doubt that it was commissioned. I was outraged by that. I was sure the book that won should have won, but I was one of three and the prize was \$15 000. It would have been poetic justice had I actually won, because that was the amount of money I had foregone in order to buy my independence.

I think the whole field of oral history is very contentious. There are historians who are very supportive of it, like Janet McCalman, like Paula Hamilton and there are others who can barely disguise their contempt for it.

Yes, I have experienced that response myself, as an oral historian. A lot of this comes down to sources, the availability of sources and how you interpret sources. It still

seems to me, that in some quarters, not enough recognition is given to the fact that all sources are created, and that because something has been written down at some point in the past, it does not necessarily have more authority.

It does raise the issue of trust in oral histories. As you say, a historian influences any topic. Whether they are writing from written sources, they are deciding what they are going to leave in, what words they use to produce the work. I never did call myself a historian, other people did. I just call myself a writer who happens to write about social history.

I do like to tell the story. I will edit oral history to make it read better. Every word that is uttered isn't inherently sacred. If you can distil out the essence of what somebody is saying, that does them a favour in that it almost makes them communicate more effectively, providing you are not misrepresenting the nature of their language and of their character.

I have had interviewees who have asked that I take out the 'ums' and 'you knows' because they don't want to be represented in that way. Some oral historians would argue that the grammatical errors and pauses are also significant and should remain in the text.

Siobhan, I wanted to ask you about your career, because your work is very diverse: in television, radio, and writing in a variety of areas. Postgraduate students in history nowadays are aware that there are not enough jobs in academia and that they must diversify if they want to find employment. I wondered if you could tell me how your career developed and what sort of opportunities you see for people who are interested in making a living as social historians?

I got into social history purely by accident because, as I said, I studied science. Then there was an ad in the paper for radio producers. It's very hard to describe what makes a good radio producer but essentially they need to have a creative streak and a highly developed, organised mind that can handle the pragmatic and administrative side. And I had that left brain, right brain thing and it was really serendipitous that I got the interview. I ended up in the light entertainment section, doing breakfast shows and I really wanted to be over in the features area. In that area you were supposed to have a degree in economics and they weren't interested in somebody with a science background. I was very lowbrow.

Eventually I did the feature I mentioned on immigrants and then I did a series on Ireland in the 60s, because not only did we have the counter-culture in Ireland in the 60s, we had the north starting, all the civil rights movement, we had Vatican II which was a huge upheaval for Catholic Ireland and economically it was a very big era. I did this marathon 16-part series called 'Strawberry Fields Forever', which won an award. I made use of oral history. It was fantastic to go back and get the Clancy Brothers and talk about the whole beginnings of the revival of Irish folk music. In a way it's so seductive. You've got a licence to go and talk to whoever you like and you can ask them to spill the beans on their inner motivation.

It's wonderful. You couldn't possibly do it in normal life. I've got quite used to doing that now and I love the intimacy of the oral history

interview. It's sounds impossible but in two hours, sometimes, you are distilling someone's life history. You have to have a really intense focus to get that kind of communication happening. I love that feeling and I feel very privileged. I've interviewed now well over one thousand people and I don't think I've ever had anybody come back to me and say, 'you have misrepresented me. I'm unhappy with the way you portrayed me.' Ten years after my book on the Snowy came out, people would ring me up to tell me that their husband had passed away, and to say things like, 'he was so pleased with that book and he gave it to our son'. I makes me feel really good, that I have been the agent for these people to tell their story.

I think that is a real strength of the methodology. Often I hear of oral history described as a methodology to bring women into history, women who might not generate other sources and have been omitted from mainstream histories.

Well that was clearly the case for the Vietnam War. Women don't figure largely in the official history, I can tell you.

No. But other examples might be those you mentioned before, as 'people on the margins'.

Yes, migrants and Aboriginal people. I have talked to people from both those groups and they tend to be left out too, because they are not mainstream. People will hesitate to interview a migrant because he or she hasn't got 'proper English'. When I first came here, I was afraid of people who were different, because I came from a very homogeneous place, Ireland. The first project I had to do here was on Muslim women. I'd never heard of Muslim women, they didn't exist in Ireland and my images were all formed by media. Women in captivity, women behind veils. But I had to go out and I found, what I should have realised, that there are all kinds of Muslim women. Some I got very close to and was on a wave length with - outgoing and humorous and feisty - and others who were more reserved. This is the great thing about radio, because you have these commissions and they are directives that I wouldn't perhaps follow up myself. That led me into training the broadcasters of SBS Radio and I have now taught people of 57 language backgrounds.

I'm interested in your recently completed project on State housing. Could you tell me how you became involved with that topic?

That was a commission. The New South Wales Housing Federation saw a review of my cotton book and there was a woman working for them who remembered me from the ABC and they were considering doing a book. The Housing Federation, the community housing peak body, wanted some kind of book that would tell stories of tenants in their own voices, and break down the stereotypes. By putting people forward as individuals, it would break down the perception of them as losers and bludgers. They had that as their objective, but once they talked to me, I said that I would want to have

complete editorial control. I need to pick the people on the basis that they have a good story to tell and I'll make sure that they are diverse, but I'm not going to pick them because they have good things to say about community housing. They said, 'fine'. I needed to be viewed as independent. It was the same for the history of the decontamination of the Olympic site. That's a radio project, a five hour show that will go onto a CD ROM. Again, it's very contentious. It's about the clean-up of dioxin. I've been interviewing former Union Carbide employees and some of them wouldn't talk to me or couldn't talk to me because they had been required to sign confidentiality agreements way back then in the 1970s.

The Housing Federation book was lovely to work on. They wanted an essay on housing policy and I desperately didn't want to do that and I managed to steer them away from that. I put my own story in at the end and the reason I did that was because I felt embarrassed. I own my own home and I was going out every day to interview these people who didn't. Even though I'm a single mother and not that well off, I own my home and I didn't want them to think that I was seeing them as sociological specimens. So I felt that if I put my story in there about renting and my need for housing and how that shaped my life - because that was the thesis of the book, where you live shapes your life - and so I put in my own story and I think that worked quite nicely. There are 19 stories of tenants and me. Somebody criticised it in a review and said it was unwarranted, but she obviously didn't understand my motives.

I think it is important in using oral methodology to position yourself in the text in some way. As you say, you can't avoid that overtone of a sociological experiment. You are interested in this other group for some reason but you need to explain why. Otherwise it can seem artificial.

It is, and it's not entirely honest. Another thing that is amazing for me is that my Irishness has been a factor in everything I've done. It took me years to realise this. For instance, on the Snowy with all the migrants, they were all delighted when I rang up, they all had fond memories of the Irish on the Snowy. The Irish were like a buffer group on the Snowy between the old Australians and the New (Australians). They were not quite Australian, yet they were white and English-speaking and they fitted in, and with their gregariousness and whatever. So I benefited from this goodwill towards the Irish. With the Vietnam story, when I went to Vietnam, I decided the Vietnamese were the Irish of Asia because they loved literature. You would see hawkers selling cigarettes and they'd been curled up on the street, reading, just all the time reading. And all the streets were named after poets and they really revered writers, the same way as in Ireland. Writers are tax-free, they are given that status as artists, they are -

living treasures?

Yes, but also they valued education. They had this history of fighting against colonialism, right back to the Chinese, and a very strong sense of the past in the present. They talked about the three Chung sisters who had

beaten the Chinese in 50 BC as if it were yesterday, very like the Irish way of going on about Cuchulainn. And then they had this absolutely unfathomable sense of humour.

Obviously here you are immediately viewed in a different light because of your accent and it's interesting that it is positive, because in the past it could well have been negative.

Some people only spoke to me because I was Irish. Nelson Lemmon, the Minister from Western Australia who started the whole Snowy scheme, he was ill when I got to him and hadn't done an interview in 30 years and he was very gruff on the phone. I knew I needed him for my first chapter. I wrote this letter trying to cajole him and his wife got it and she rang me and said, 'Do you know a town called Mullingar?' I said, 'yes, it's about 40 miles from Dublin', and something warned me not to say that it's known for its dreadful country music, and she said, 'My mother came from Mullingar and I've told Nelson he must speak to you'.

How often are you able to get an idea and just go with it? I know as an independent writer you have to have some funding. Is it still the case where you can take a project and think, 'I think this would make a great book and be financially viable'.

No book is commercially viable. Look at the Snowy. It is now in about its sixth reprint, so it sells a steady 1000 books a year and that's very good. So I get about \$2 a copy, \$2000 a year in royalties. As an advance for the Snowy I got \$15 000. When they say advance, you get some money, \$5000 when you give them the idea and then you get another \$5000 two years later when you give them the manuscript and six months later, when it is published, you get the final \$5000. In the meantime, for two years you have lived on \$5000. You've interviewed 100 people and had phone calls to another 300, and sent out letters. You've travelled. The advance for the Snowy would just about have covered the expenses, the travelling expenses. That doesn't include transcription. Nowadays I pay for transcription because I can't stand to do it, it bores me. It's a luxury. I use that time to write a journalistic article which I can sell and pay for the transcription. But essentially the only time a book will pay is if there is a television interest to pick up on it and with the Snowy, that happened. Film Australia bought the rights and I got another \$20 000, which included my fee for being associate producer. Then it won the award for the Premier's prize, another \$15 000, so \$50 000, but that represented three years of work, with the book, the film, and the radio series. Now the radio series paid some pittance at the ABC, which I think was about \$5000, it might have been \$6000 for six months work. So, say \$55 000 for three years' work and I mean from 9am to 6pm every day. I didn't do anything else.

The only way I was able to survive, because I had to pay expenses, was that I was actually lucky enough to get an Australian Council Grant. It came through when I had already embarked on the research, and I'll never

forget it because I was down to \$20 in the bank. It's very hard because, in Australia Council terms, I'm a writer and writers are supposed to be able to just write in the toilet. You're not supposed to need research costs and all those sort of things. I have to pay for the internet, phone calls, and every paperclip. They don't allow for research, they give you something that you are supposed to live on. Even so, I have been very well served by the Australia Council.

Basically, I have evolved over 15 years a sort of system where I do my writing and my paid work and I operate the two systems. When I do paid work, I insist on getting award rates, whether it be for writing an article or doing some work for the National or State Library. If I go to a conference, I say to them, 'have you got any funding to get me over there? I don't have an institution to pay for my fare.' And very often they will have. You have to be really assertive. People want you to come and speak. It's three days out of your earning week. I usually charge a day to prepare my talk because that's a day when I could be earning money. People think that I would just like to be there, and I'd love to, but I just can't afford it. I'm amazed that I have actually survived as a freelance writer, full time since 1988.

Thanks very much, Siobhan. I think your experiences as a writer are useful to history postgraduates faced with having to diversify their skills as historians to find work outside the academy.