

LIMINA Interview: Professor Michael Roe, January 1996

Professor Michael Roe *taught history at the University of Tasmania until his retirement in February 1996. He graduated from the University of Melbourne and proceeded to Peterhouse at Cambridge before taking up a doctoral scholarship at the Australian National University. His most recent book, Australia, Britain, and Migration 1915-1940, was published in 1995. Professor Roe 'spoke' (via Australia Post) with Peter McClelland.*

P. *I'd like to begin by talking about the books you've written - I'm thinking here of something akin to an artist's 'retrospective'. Would you like to comment about those publications, particularly your latest one?*

M. I put a great deal of time and effort into my books, which perhaps justifies or at least explains the conceit with which I regard them. That is, I think each of the big four says important things - I *purr* whenever people recognise that and *scratch* if they don't. I'd claim for *Australia, Britain, and Migration* that it combines administrative and human history in an unusual way and that it is one of the few monographs really to tell about Australia in the 1920s.

P. *Given your own focus on Australian history, would you care to say something about your own background; was there anything in particular that provoked your interest in History as a subject and/or shaped the way you write it?*

M. My focus is not all that exclusively on Australian history: *Tichborne* is 'British', *Bishop 'Pacific'*; *Australia, Britain, and Migration*, 'Anglo-Oz'. Moreover, *Quest* and *Progressives* both stress the impact of ideas from outside. Thus, even my Australian history is - to use the Russian analogy - of 'Westerniser' rather than 'Slavophil' kind. My teaching has included great slabs of Medieval Europe, Modern Europe, Modern Britain and the USA.

It's altogether my mind-set that pre-disposed me to History. Right from Grade 5 at Caulfield Grammar School that was the subject, the only one, in which I always came top. In 1949, as a first-year undergraduate, I enrolled in Arts/Law but abandoned the latter with scarcely a thought at year's end. I lacked facility in languages and the tutoring job available for me in

Melbourne on graduation was in 'Australian' - the ANU has its obvious strength there. The time for me to have moved into another field would have been either when going to Cambridge or on graduation thence, but failing to get a 'first' there closed such doors.

Melbourne certainly made me the kind of historian I like to think I am: interested in issues that are 'big' but open to empirical analysis and which must be pursued with diligent zeal. This was re-enforced by the prevailing mode at Canberra in the later 1950s. I arrived there just after W.K. Hancock took up his position as Professor of History at the ANU and my supervisor was Manning Clark who was previously Professor at the old University College where the History Department had three other members - and even that gave a comfortable staff-student ratio! Later that influence diminished but it was Manning of the 1950s, especially the author of that superb article on Australian historiography in T.A.G. Hungerford's *Australian Signposts*, who affected me ... to my very great benefit.

P. *Professor Trish Crawford was asked about the 'death' or 'end of History' (Francis Fukuyama and all that!) and I was wondering if you have any thoughts on the 'death' of Australian history - apparently the number of young Australians electing to study their own country's past is declining rapidly. Have you seen any evidence of this in Tasmania?*

M. I'm not sure if Francis Fukuyama's *End of History* is pertinent as he talks about history-as-experience not history-as-thought. But, yes, I do fear for the malaise of history-as-thought, that is, as an academic discipline. Our student numbers here fell in the 1970s and remain well below our peak of 25 years ago. The ultimate reason surely lies in the post-modern age-spirit. Radical subjectivism demeans the notion of there being truth, which might be discovered in the historian's traditional way; in that vacuum there often develops a wish for a world-view that supplies answers, whereas traditional history-as-study emphasises the asking of questions. I am close to saying that modern youth eschews the hardness (intellectual, moral, even physical) of history-as-study. So it always was, no doubt, but rather more so today.

Yes, Australian history does seem to be especially suffering the malaise. I am not sure why. Is there some shame in being an ordinary (that is, the kind I am) Australian? Note that the more vigorous branches of Australian history - concerning women, Aborigines, post-1945 ethnic migrants - are those in which prevailing consciousness encourages commitment (at times degenerating into biologic triumphalism) which contrasts with the widespread disparagement of 'ordinary' Australia.

P. *To pursue the issue of an 'age-spirit' further, in your *Quest for Authority* you identified 'moral enlightenment' as a new force of authority. The quest in recent years has obviously had various motivations, but with Malcolm Turnbull nudging us all towards a Republic I'm interested in what forces you see as important as we approach the twenty-first century?*

M. As I remarked above, I remain a barracker for my books. It seems to me that 'moral enlightenment' is the best basis for any society. (Is this not what Fukuyama is saying?) While having old-man concerns about not only modern youth but modern society more generally, I still think 'moral enlightenment' has a firm hold in Australia. The shift to the Republic may well be an occasion for a more didactic teaching of those principles.

P. *I'd like to turn now to the regional dimension of writing history. The Universities of Tasmania and Western Australia both have, some would suggest, a 'liminal' voice; our very geographical location means, to some extent, we speak from the margins. Do you see this as a problem, something to be overcome, or can it be a blessing in disguise?*

M. My emphasis on Melbourne and Canberra has its complement in that I do not see Tasmanian residence as having much affected my meta-history, as it were. Note that I had included Van Diemen's Land in my doctorate (which led to *Quest for Authority*) before I came south. Conversely, my emphasis has been to see Tasmanian experience as part of the Australian story, of course with its own emphases but these are often to clarify the overall picture rather than to contradict it. Some people here have criticised me for not pushing Tasmanian history sufficiently as a separate academic pursuit. The very way in which I am now answering your question makes the point - I am not keen to take a 'liminal' position (but recognise that that may be a fault).

P. *I don't want to lapse into some sort of Braudelian, geophysical determinism but one cannot ignore the stunningly different climate and landscape of Tasmania compared with the mainland. Do you think this has shaped, as John Berger would put it, a 'way of seeing' Tasmania's past?*

M. There is some convention that the wild and wondrous character of much of Tasmania's topography accords with the Gothic/tragic elements in its history. See, for example, on the dust-jackets of Lloyd Robson's *History*. Richard Flanagan has pointed out that John West and other anti-transportationists were avid to characterise the island's south-west as 'wilderness' because connotations of 'wilderness' accorded with their image of convictism generally and Macquarie Harbour especially. There is some force in all this, but (somewhat like Flanagan) I would want to modify such trends. Tasmania's wondrous and wild regions are 'awe-full' rather than awful. They have their kind of beauty; other parts of the island offer more conventional, but still profound, beauty. My tendency would be to stress the variety and power of landscape within the island and stress those traits as appropriate in shaping the ideal world-view for the historian, indeed for everybody.

However, it was not living in Tasmania that led me to this stance; rather that stance prompted my attachment to Tasmania. It arises from inner, inexplicable personality. It could not be a product of my having grown up in Caulfield - the quintessence of flat middle-classness. (Cherished forever!) I have little time for determinism - climatic, environmental, biologic or even socio-economic.

P. *Again focusing upon Tasmanian history, in the Flow of Culture you quote Hetherington in saying that 'our history here is nasty, brutish and short-lived' and go on to suggest that 'a way of exorcising shame and scars might be to attribute those aspects of our past to Empire and the British connection'. Perhaps now, however, those brutish aspects are no longer seen as shameful?*

M. Hetherington was also presenting the Gothic/tragic view; the new historiography is presenting Aboriginal experience as being not-crudely-brutish. In a somewhat comparable way, as my earlier reference to Macquarie Harbour indicated, the anti-transportationists' bleak image of

convicts and convictism has been modified. The fact remains that grim events happened. I was not encouraging off-loading guilt onto Britain, but rather insisting that intellectual honesty demands recognition that those grim and brutal things did happen as part of our history, through the actions of our forbears.

P. I'll make this my last Gothic/tragic question. Would you agree with Henry Reynolds, whom I believe you taught, that Tasmania is a 'bloody sad place ... you can still hear the Aboriginals crying in the wind'?

M. I supervised Henry Reynolds' MA and he'd graduated by 1960. As Henry indicates, those words you quote derived from Malcolm McCrae, who did most of his teaching in Australian history here before his death in 1974. Malcolm was a born and bred Tasmanian and his remark conforms to that Gothic/tragic view I remarked on before. Tragedy abounds in the story of the Tasmanian Aboriginals, but note that the new historiography - in which Henry has played so distinguished a part - is concerned to stress not tragedy, but Aboriginal resilience and agency. Indeed, I think *Fate of a Free People* goes too far in this direction. Withal, it is a most interesting book - splendidly written, acute and provocative.

P. Talking about Henry Reynolds is apposite here because I'd like to ask you whether you think that academics - and I'm thinking here of Ian Turner's comment regarding 'historians who are committed not only to their profession but to a belief' - should be more engaged in public debate?

M. No, I do not think that historians should be committed to a 'belief' in the sense that you evidently mean it. The historian, as historian, should care only about the discovery of truth about the past. (I am giving a secular view of what Henry Butterfield - who became Master of Peterhouse just a few weeks after I went there - wrote in the final words of his *Christianity and History*: 'Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted'.) I maintain this, albeit with some sympathy for the Crocean view that only one who cares about humanity and its problems will be able to grasp the essence of an historical situation. Ian Turner seems to offer evidence in support of my stand: rich in personality and intellect, he committed himself for years to international Stalinism. That seems to me a terrible warning against 'belief'.

May I make a further point, related and more difficult if less contentious. If an historian upholds 'belief', then there is much pressure to act as a prophet foretelling the future. I believe that such prophecy subverts the historian's true pursuit. That is, it seems to me, events can only be understood in retrospect. At any one time there prevails a multitude of apparent possibilities as to what might be about to happen, but no certainty. If certainty prevails in the present, as the prophet tends to aver, then it must have prevailed in the past. That is, the past was pre-determined and if the past is pre-determined then historical study loses what I see as its essence: discovery of why one particular possible outcome of events did, in fact, prevail.

P. Stuart Macintyre and Julian Thomas have recently edited a book entitled, The Discovery of Australian History which examines the 'lives and works of ten of the early historians who pioneered the academic discipline of Australian History'.

Do you have any comments on the contribution of any of those, so called, 'early historians'?

M. A much truer title for that book would have been 'Shapers of Academic History in Australia'. Even as to that the authors - skilled and stylish as they are - add only a little to what the assiduous reader already knows. I have already named Hancock and Crawford who both figure in *Discovery*. Perhaps most revealing is Deryck Schreuder's essay on S.H. Roberts. Probably the least couth and likeable of all these historians (a few years back I met G.F. James, who did some work at Sydney University History Department ... after fifty-plus years he still remained sore at Robert's ruthless selfishness), Roberts had power second only to Hancock. What he [Roberts] achieved in twenty years! Epic books on Australian land settlement, French colonial policy and Hitler's regime - and other important work to boot.

P. *To finish I'd like to thank you for agreeing to be interviewed and, finally, ask you two questions: first, what has been your experience of academic culture and, second, what would be an ideal working environment?*

M. Well, I begin *Australia, Britain, and Migration* with thanks to that institution 'for continuing provision of an environment which makes possible the kind of scholarship whence this book proceeds'. Perhaps I belong to a personality type which tends to play the Pollyanna game and finds good in whatever one's experience has happened to be. The downsides of that are complacency, an absence of the dynamic of 'divine discontent' and so a tendency to become irritated with one's colleagues who have that discontent.

Whether or not life was meant to be easy, in fact it is not, and academic life follows that rule. We have our special privileges and also our special problems. Academics are highly self-conscious, generally striving to meet high, never-ceasing demands. So there can develop a neurotic edge to things. That's the extent of my criticism. I have met few lazy, deceitful exploitative academics and I have had too little experience of other *milieux* to make comparative judgements.

Regarding an ideal working environment, my answers are obvious: sabbatical study leave; research assistance for particular tasks, but not so much to impugn one's control over the project; secretarial support; teaching which prompts reading and thinking on a range of issues but does not become overwhelmingly onerous. 'Casualisation' is antithetical to what I see as the academic ideal. Writing good history takes years and years and 'casualisation' undermines all the good commitments. Instead, it encourages superficiality, showmanship and opportunism. Some casuals resist. They are better women and men than I am.