

## OUT OF TIME, OUT OF PLACE: REENACTING THE PAST OF A FOREIGN COUNTRY<sup>1</sup>

*Stephen Gapps*

I am interested in the history and practices of dressing up as history. In Australia, over the last one hundred years or so, popular performance such as parades, pageants and historical reenactments have promoted the sharing of national histories. Certain events and characters have been theatrically recreated as worthy history lessons—the ‘discoverer’, ‘settler’, ‘pioneer’ or ‘explorer’. The portability of performance enhanced efforts to suggest that certain histories could be anchored in place. The 1970s, however, saw a transformation of these practices in ‘living history museums’ and amateur ‘historical reenactment’ groups across Australia. This form of accessible, unsanctioned and relatively inexpensive history work allowed wider participation and expanded the range of histories and historical characters performed. As people chose the characters that appealed most to them, costumed history split into several strands: popular form, tourist site, official version and local celebratory performance. The popular form—as practised by ‘weekend historians’ who in Australia define themselves as ‘reenactors’—is the focus of this article.<sup>2</sup>

Historical reenactment must be the most visceral form of a range of history work by the public that requires imagination and participation, such as heritage tourism, history films, museums and historical novels. As such it has distinctive practices, often overlooked by public historians and cultural critics, that illuminate some significant public attitudes toward history and the past. Self-styled ‘reenactors’ go to extraordinary lengths to acquire and activate what history might look and feel like. We hammer and sew in backyard workshops to create costume wardrobes of various histories. What interests me here is that in Australia, the types of histories hanging in our closets are largely the histories of other countries. I write here as a reenactor of American and European but not Australian history. Why might Australians *want* to reenact histories so remote from their own experience?

As I don my costume in order to perform history ‘out of place’, I am confronted with an apparent paradox: if a reenactment is meant to be an historically accurate recreation, how is it possible for it to be conceived and accepted in unauthentic surrounds? Is this a confirmation of the imaginative conceptual work in reenactments? Or do we overemphasise place



The author (seated) with friends at Sydney Park performing Renaissance music, 2000

when we come to think about history? Thinking about the practice of reenacting 'out of place' has meant investigating connections between authenticity, public history and place and asking what might happen to history when the American Civil War or Medieval Europe is performed under the gum trees.

In the United States and Europe it is rare to find historical reenactors who portray more than one place or period of history. Yet in Australia this is common. Of 268 reenactment groups in Australia, Medieval European history is the most popular, followed by the Napoleonic era, the Renaissance, Ancient Greece and Rome and North American history. The majority of Australians who invest in 'reenacting', who call themselves 'reenactors', rather than occasionally dressing up at local celebrations, are interested in participating in someone else's history. Indeed, like many reenactors, at a moment's notice I could summon up from my closet one thousand years of history and several continents. I could transform into a ninth or eleventh century European peasant, a late Medieval person, a Renaissance troubadour, an English Civil War musketeer or an 1860s American Civil War soldier.<sup>3</sup>

In Australia, unlike Europe and America, a notable division has developed between reenactors of foreign histories and reenactors of local or Australian history. Generally, Australian history, performed at such places as

the living history museums Sovereign Hill and Old Sydney Town, presents a limited range of pasts mostly confined to repetitive and ostensibly reassuring colonial, pioneering, rural histories. Amateur reenactors of Australian history at local celebrations similarly confine their portrayals to myopic, rural histories of bushrangers, settlers or pioneers. Unlike reenactors of European or American histories, 'authenticity' is rarely central to these practices.

I had, like many reenactors, wondered whether our turn towards other histories was because Australian history itself could not sustain the 'practice' of reenacting. European Australian history is not pre-modern enough, too open a wound or too fresh in memory for popular participation as performance. For example, many medieval reenactors I have spoken to agree that the colonial past could never *performatively* attract them. For reenactors, historical context often takes second place to decisions about which pasts to activate in the present. It is not that we do not want to do our own pasts. But people who have chosen to devote their weekends, sometimes their whole social lives, to reenacting—people who consider themselves as skilled performers of history—are much better at *performing* other people's histories.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, the centrality of authenticity to Australian reenactment of others' histories is quite high. Recently a seventeenth-century reenactor from Britain who emigrated to Australia (without his costume as he did not think he would need it) was surprised at the standard of English Civil War reenactment here. He confided to me, somewhat embarrassed, that it was no different from that in Britain, just a lot smaller. So too an Australian and New Zealand contingent of medieval reenactors travelled to Britain last year for a reenactment of the 1066 battle of Hastings. They expected to be relatively 'inaccurate' among British reenactors, who would surely know how to do their own history well. But they returned to Australia convinced that Australian medieval reenacting, though smaller in numbers, was little different, if not of a higher standard than in Britain. Perhaps here we overcompensate in authenticity from an insecurity in playing with someone else's past. One Australian reenactor I know wants his seventeenth-century pike (a long spear) to be totally accurate and is currently growing an oak tree to the right length.<sup>5</sup>

Although increasingly incorporating other aspects of past lives, much contemporary reenactment has historically centred on a dramatic, masculine (re)play of military conflict, popularised in the 1970s in Britain, Australia and the United States by medieval knights in armour and in the United States during the 1980s by American Civil War reenactors. Although battle reenactment relies on imagination around, and performance of, military conflict, this immersion in masculine play *as* history has required an earnest engagement with the forms, concepts and ramifications of *doing* history.

For military reenactment to become widely accepted as serious history it is useful if it can be aligned as national or ancestral remembrance. Australia, however, has no romantic, martial history such as the American Civil War that is neither traumatic nor too close in memory and can cater for mass participation for contemporary political and social concerns. Although there is a large number of people who 'recreate' the World War I Light Horse cavalry, they do not describe themselves as reenactors. They combine the attraction of horse-riding with history and perform commemorative duties. Apart from some rare exceptions, their performance competency standards are based around ceremonial demeanour rather than historical accuracy of costume or prop—a central tenet of reenactment. In Australia, the masculine sacrificial moment of World War I appears perfect for reenactment. But unlike the American Civil War, its more industrialised nature *feels* too recent. Authentic portrayals of Gallipoli are not as readily conceivable or as dramatic a spectacle as, say, the battle of Gettysburg.<sup>6</sup>

Reenactors generally identify as performers very much concerned with getting their 'impressions'—their costumes, accoutrements and immersive paraphernalia as 'accurate' or 'authentic' as possible, within certain boundaries of physical comfort or danger. There is little desire, for example, to replicate death and disease. They are also more likely to want to meet in a sort of 'history camping' in rustic landscapes in order to physically experience their recreated objects and to create conditions that might lead to a conception of the performance (and their experience) as matching the past in some way. Creating a feeling for 'what it must have been like' or a consensus among participants that 'they would have done it like that' (in the past) is important in these mostly private history gatherings. Public audiences tend to break the spell of being immersed in, say, a medieval village.

A shared aesthetics of authenticity is crucial for participants (and in often different ways, public audiences) to readily conceive a performance as historical reenactment. Although 'history camping' in many ways confirms history as pre-industrial and romantic, to experience history as an immersion in authenticity means employing much of the practices and skills of historians. Reenactors generally base their costumes and props on extensive historical research—indeed some only recreate museum artefacts. Authenticity has become a guide for reenactors to comprehend each others standards of performance and attach social value to their representations *as* history.

Reenactors have created a certain aesthetics of history that goes beyond an external, visual authenticity and is deeply bound in how history might feel. One reenactor suggests her 'impression' must be complete in detail, or the 'experience' is less convincing:

My impression cannot be superficial. My objective is not to conceal modern items but to re-create a historic time and place in detail. Therefore my impression is as accurate and complete as I can make it on every level—including ... the contents of my pockets.<sup>7</sup>



American Civil War reenactors at the annual Taminick military living history encampment, Victoria 2000 (Photograph Stephen Gapps)

Reenactors are passionate about their equipment, paraphernalia and costume. We delight in being able to show the fine details of our impersonation: the lining of our jackets, the hand stitching of seams, the contents of a bag with tinder and flint to light a fire—small moments of surprise that activate history. In the hands of reenactors, or in our displays, the handmade object becomes a sign of history. Reenactors can describe their clothes and equipment in great detail, fetishising their artefacts and suggesting ownership of these pasts. Yet as cultural critic Dennis Hall notes of American Civil War reenactors, their relationships to their possessions are 'deeply contextualised in knowledge and the use of these objects, embedded in the sense of themselves as creative individuals'.<sup>8</sup> Reenactors attempt to reduce the mediation inherent in any representation of the past. The past comes to appear more accessible and verified by experiencing the production and feel of created moments and recreated artefacts.

These practices of reenacting have become increasingly global ways of participating in history. A significant factor here is the international construction and flow of the frameworks for performance history practices. Since the 1970s, American Civil War reenactment in the United States has become almost an art form, where students can progress to the higher levels

of authenticity competencies. These practices that structure historical performances have become part of generic reenactment standards that travel the reenactment globe. They are not particularly American, though perhaps best seen in American Civil War reenactment. Australian reenactment of medieval history, for example, is influenced by research methods, attitudes about how to perform in character, the sorts of props and the trends and standards of American Civil War reenacting. Reenactors' debates over various styles or modes of performing are often almost instantly taken up in other countries. Like many weekend organisations, reenactors have readily taken to the internet to discuss and organise. We can participate in debates around frameworks for historical performance that have no national boundaries and increasingly less cultural specificity.

Of course certain symbolism is lost in cross-cultural translations. In American Civil War reenactment, political and social investments in American histories inside the United States fail to transfer to Australian performances. The display of the Confederate battle flag, for example, has become a heated political contest much wider than the reenactment community. Allegiance to authenticity over contemporary political concerns complicates this issue for reenactors. Many find reenactments a safe haven for marginalised political views that appear to match historical ones, whilst other reenactors find it confronting to be historically accurate to certain contested symbols.<sup>9</sup>

American Civil War reenactment in Australia may not remind people of the contested nature of these histories nor contain the same potency. Without a strong cultural memory of remembering the American Civil War, for example, its performance can be acceptable. In fact a certain performative freedom can be a positive history practice. For example, an indigenous Australian friend of mine could not find a place, nor want to participate in reenacting Australian history. He has, however, been involved in performance of overseas histories, as an American Civil War reenactor. Similarly a friend recently recounted to me how she was surprised to meet an Aboriginal family interested in attending the Brisbane Medieval Fair. But they informed her they were surprised that she might find their interest surprising. They were pleased to see European Australians reenacting European history.<sup>10</sup>

Reenacting other countries' histories might pique sensibilities of appropriate relations between landscape, culture and imagination. If we can readily conceive of theatre without a stage, is it essential for a theatre of history to possess place as its backdrop? International trades and transfers of histories and history practices hold significant insights into how public history is not always generated by belonging to place. Indeed doing others histories can be part of a de-localised history work not so embedded in nostalgia. Reenacting 'out of place' is one response to historical failures in linking history, belonging and place. Place and belonging are of course highly significant in the public's history work. A strong focus on history and place, however, creates the danger of cementing history in a place at



Seventeenth-century reenactors with pikes and muskets at Darling Harbour, Sydney, 2000 (Photograph Stephen Gapps)

the expense of some significant international transfers of history and history-making practices.

For me, to don a medieval costume or an American Civil War outfit and perform in public is riskier history work than writing an article. It is more visceral, insistent, perhaps more creative and definitely more audacious. Yet performing history 'out of place' can suggest international connections rather than ruptures. It can include difference and turn our attention toward cross cultural flows of history. For the moment, avoiding complex bodily representations of the colonial past in Australia may assist in redirecting history performance practices. Collaborations in non-places, cultural border zones of ephemeral performance histories, might be less discursive divisions and placeless spaces where history may become performative sites of historical possibility and multiple experiential options.

## NOTES

1. This article is based on 'Doing Others' Pasts: Historical Reenactments of Foreign Histories', a paper delivered at the National Council on Public History Twenty-Third Annual Conference, *Belonging: Public Historians and Place*, Ottawa, April 2001.
2. This article gathers some of my experiences and observations from my involvement in historical reenactments and participation in reenactment groups over the last ten years. My research material includes internet based discussion lists, a favourite organising tool for reenactors and sites of some wonderful discussions about how to recreate the past. The divisions I suggest between reenactors employed at historic sites or who perform at memorial services or local celebrations are not hard and fast. However people who class themselves as reenactors are essentially *weekend* history performers.
3. <http://www.ozemail.com.au/~adjutant/arlho/arlho.htm> The Australasian Register of Living History Organisations has acted as an umbrella contact point for reenactors since 1989. This list provides a rough guide to the often rapidly appearing and disappearing reenactment societies in Australia, but gives a good indication of the sorts of history focused on. It is difficult to assess the numbers of active participants, but my surveys of living history groups and historical reenactment societies between 1996 and 2001 indicate around 3000 reenactors nationally.
4. See for example John Huxley 'With a Rebel Yell', *Good Weekend* magazine, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 June 1998, pp16–21.
5. See Living History Discussion List Archives: [living-history@gospel.iinet.net.au](mailto:living-history@gospel.iinet.net.au) September 2000.
6. The practice of First World War reenacting is growing, perhaps in tandem with the fading of living memory. American Civil War reenacting may have been spawned from a post-Vietnam war crisis in United States masculinity, however it has been at the forefront of international reenacting practices and has come to incorporate much more than purely battle reenactment. See Cathy Stanton, *Being The Elephant: The American Civil War Reenacted*, MA Thesis, Vermont University, 1997, and Jim Cullen, *The Civil War in Popular Culture: A Reusable Past*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1995.
7. Susan Lyons Hughes 'The Authentic Civilian's Manifesto', <http://members.aol.com/SMckay1234/LivingHistory/manifesto.htm>
8. Dennis Hall 'Civil War Reenactors and the Postmodern Sense of History', *Journal of American Culture*, Fall 1994, vol 17 no 3, pp4–5. Hall suggests authentic clothing (and paraphernalia) form part of a triangle of ingredients for successful American Civil War reenactment along with the experience of battle and being in an evocative landscape.
9. Self-styled 'authentic' reenactors have shown the construction of the battle flag as a symbol of the South occurred after the American Civil War and its display in reenactments is largely inaccurate. These new battlefields of American history rework cultural memories of democratic rights of the individual. See Ann Burlein, 'Counter-memory on the Right: The Case of the Focus on the Family' in Meike Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (eds), *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, University Press of New England, Hanover N.H., 1999, pp208–17.
10. My thanks to historian Joanna Seczkowski for her anecdote.