

# Adventures in Biography

## Writing, life and life writing

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## Online Discussion with Clare Wright, author of The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka

Posted on July 21, 2015 by MST



The lovely people at the ACT Writers Centre are going above and beyond to ensure that the **HARDCOPY** professional development program for emerging writers is a cracker.

Last night we HARDCOPY participants were lucky enough to take part in an online discussion with Associate Professor Clare Wright. For 90 minutes we inundated her with questions and she gamely fielded them with wisdom and insight.

It's hard to say what Clare is best known for: *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* won the 2014 Stella Prize;

her first book *Beyond the Ladies Lounge: Australia's Female Publicans* was a best seller; she is a gifted essayist with work appearing in *The Age*, *Crikey*, *The Guardian*, *The Conversation*, *The Week*, *Overland*, *Women's Agenda* and *Meanjin* as well as leading national and international scholarly journals. But perhaps you know Clare from being on the telly – she appeared as a member of 'The Brains Trust' in over 40 episodes of the long-running ABC quiz show, *The Einstein Factor*.

With the permission of Clare, and of the HARDCOPY project officer, below are some of the highlights of Clare's responses. The actual online 'conversation' was much more convoluted, with questions and answers and comments coming in fast and furious from about 20 curious HARDCOPIERS.

Clare began by expanding upon what she means by the 'historical imagination':

...as an historian, I have a simple pact with my readers. Just as the doctor's oath is to 'do no harm', I think the historian's pledge is to 'not make shit up'. Everything you write has to be based on evidence. (If you are speculating, you need to make it clear you are speculating.) But that doesn't mean that the writing needs be dry and lifeless. You have to imbue the narrative with imagination, curiosity and wonder. It has to be driven by questions; a questioning of the past. Those questions are answered by the archive, but only your imagination can limit those questions.

Clare, when you're about to start a writing project, how much do you already know about the topic? Is everything mapped out, or is it about having a line of inquiry and going from there?

My projects are only ever sparked by a line of inquiry. You need to have a research design – i.e.: a plan for how you are going to answer those questions, which archives you are going to delve into first etc – but you can't have an argument. If you already have an argument, then you are writing polemic and relying on historical evidence as your 'proof'. That's not writing history. I'm about to start a new HUGE research project – a history of mining in Australia – and although I have a well mapped out research design, I have NO IDEA what I

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might eventually say in the book (which has already been contracted). So that is both scary and exhilarating.

I'm hoping you get a chance to interview Aboriginal Elders in your mining book.

Yes I will be. And because I'm conducting the research under the auspices of a university, I have to comply with a rigorous ethics process!

So objectivity and an open mind are crucial to the process?

Absolutely! I think your research enquiry has to be guided by a genuine sense of curiosity. You are on a quest, and like any hero, you don't know what sort of dragons or pools of quicksand might be around the next bend. An open mind is essential.

I'm not sure about the word 'objectivity', which is often a synonym for dull but worthy. You have to keep a critical distance to an extent, weighing and evaluating the evidence, but I think it's fine to have an emotional closeness to your subject matter. In fact, you have to write with passion and enthusiasm. You have to care.

What tips/tricks/advice do you have for us in organising our research?

I don't know any two researchers who take notes and organise their material in the same way. There are some incredible digital tools on the market these days. Zotero seems to be the program of choice for most Humanities researchers. But to tell you the truth I don't know how to use it. I keep notes in A4 size exercise books. I take down quotes etc on the right hand page, and keep the left hand page for my own scribbles. I usually use a separate notebook for either different themes (e.g.: Women and Protest Movements), or different archival collections (e.g.: State Library of Victoria), or different archive types (e.g.: Letter, Diaries, Manuscripts). That means when I head into the archives I only take a notebook and a pencil with me. Later, when I'm preparing to write, I go back through all my notebooks and 'keyword' the various quotes, according to themes that I've only been able to identify because I've done the research. Eg: independence, freedom, sex, childcare. I didn't necessarily know these would be the keywords before I started the project. (I certainly didn't know childcare would be a thing on the goldfields, for eg.) I also use Endnote as a way of keeping all my references in one place. I enter the keywords into each Endnote ref as well as which notebook that ref can be found in. That way, I can do an Endnote search for, say, 'independence', and find all the refs that have quotes pertaining to that them. It works for me. I researched my Eureka book over 10 years so there was a lot of material to organise. I hope that makes sense.

I've found that my line of enquiry leads to some fascinating stories and some that are... well.. not so engaging but I'd still like to include them because they are otherwise important. Do you use techniques to enhance the readability of those aspects of subject and if so how?

Research inevitably involves rabbit holes. I disappeared down one for six months while investigating the curious case of the Lazarus diary. None of that work appears in the final book (Forgotten Rebels) which is one of the reasons I published a separate article. The first draft of Rebels was almost 200,000 words, an unpublishable length (unless you're Peter FitzSimons!) So I had to excise about 70,000 words to get to the final manuscript. That involved killing many many many darlings. In the end, we all have to make choices about what aids the narrative, what moves the action and its significance along, no matter how

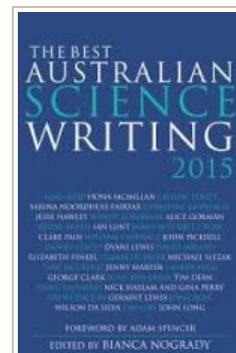
This House of Grief by Helen Garner

Visiting Bridgerule, Dreaming of the Past

### Worth a Look

- Biographers International Organisation
- Center for the Study of Transformative Lives
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- Griffith Review
- Lapham's Quarterly
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intrinsically interesting other stories are.

If there is material that is important to the story, but somewhat dry, then yes, it will be your use of language and your form of expression that will enhance the readability. Just resist the temptation to embellish the story with things that a fiction writer might conjure up to make the narrative more compelling or emotionally satisfying!

When editing down your manuscript, did you actually kill your darlings or will you (as you did with the Lazarus Diary) save them for something else?

Most of my darlings are dead. I can't bear to exhume them for other purposes. I've lived with this project for far too long. As my grandmother would say, 'enough already with the Eureka!'

I see you're writing YA version of *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka (We Are The Rebels)*, which sounds like a great idea! What do you see as the key elements that will differentiate your YA from your adult version of the story, to make it especially compelling for a younger audience?

My YA version actually comes out next week! (Check out my Clare Wright Historian FB page for a pic of my happy editor holding a book fresh from the printers.) It was really fun to write. The main differences are: 1) length, the YA is two thirds shorter than the A book; 2) anything that doesn't directly drive the narrative is out or relegated to 'break-out boxes' of thematic/contextual material or character profiles of the main players; 3) the language is not dumbed down, but it is simplified ie shorter sentences. In many ways, the YA book probably contains better writing – pared down and direct.

I was wondering, as someone writing a less research-intensive piece (i.e. memoir): what are your tips for weaving facts and multiple points of views into a cohesive narrative?

I've never written memoir, but my *Forgotten Rebels* book definitely has multiple points of view. What I have tried to do there is leave as much as possible in the words of the historical actors themselves. I often felt that I was like a conductor of a vast choir. It was my decision when to bring the voices in, whose to raise, whose to moderate, when I needed the voices in harmony, when dissonance was warranted. But ultimately the story is told through the lives of the people who were there. It's not ABOUT me.

It's wonderful to hear that your work starts with a line of enquiry and no end point.

I think one of the really gnarly things about research is knowing when to stop. I've never written fiction, so I might be talking out of turn here, but I imagine that in a fictional story you get to choose the end. You are in complete control of your characters and the events they are messed up in because you have created them. In non-fiction, and particularly in history I guess, the story has no conclusion. A person dies. But then do you research what happened to their offspring? A conflict is resolved. But then do you find out what the waves of repercussion were for the multiple protagonists in the drama? At some point, every researcher on every project has to pull up stumps and sit down with what they have and WRITE. I call the first draft 'brain dump'. Get it all out there on paper (on screen). Find out what you have and what else you might need to plug holes or tie up loose ends. The second draft is when you begin to make sense of what you have before you (on paper, on screen) rather than in notes, in ideas. Then you can begin to shape the narrative and craft the writing.

How do you show you care without tangling yourself in a line of voice that no longer seems trustworthy? Do you interrogate your work with particular questions to help weed out these danger points out?

I think you always have to interrogate your processes: intellectual, emotional, ethical. But the decision is whether to do that on the page, in full view of the reader, inviting them into your dilemmas, or to resolve your issues off stage. I found with *Rebels* that I wore all my troubles on my sleeve in Draft 1, and then pulled them all out again by Draft 2. I was trying to do an Anna Funder in Draft 1, but it just came out messy and self-conscious and a little bit desperate.

What is more rigorous, interviewing sources or researching lines of enquiry and sourcing direct quotes? I ask as I've included case studies in my MS but am also toying with doing some desktop research to add another perspective.

It depends to an extent on your subject matter. Obviously you can't interview people about the events they witnessed in 1854. I did talk to many descendants, and hear family stories, but I had to weigh these against what I knew from archival research. All research must be rigorous. You can't take anything for gospel, but rather you use your intuition and smarts to make an educated deduction as to what actually happened.

I'm interested in your thoughts on referencing. I'm writing biography/history for general audience and would rather not use footnotes in text as they break up flow.

Make them endnotes. The only publications that still use footnotes, as far as I'm aware, are academic journals. All book publishers will want endnotes. Then there's the question of HOW MUCH to put in endnotes, and often this is driven by the publisher too. I was lucky. My publisher allowed me to have loads of quite interpretive notes. My advice would be to make an endnote citation for every quotation you use (just so you don't lose track of the source) and then see what else a publisher will let you get away with. With my first book, which was a PhD thesis-turned-book, my publisher wanted me to cut my notes down by two thirds. That might give you some indication.

As a qualified research ninja, outside of familiarity with Trove, what are your top tips for historical research for rank amateurs like myself?

Trove is AMAZING and an absolute boon to all researchers, allowing things to be found that would never otherwise have been found. But I can't stress highly enough the importance of leaving your desk and your personal computer and walking into a library and diving headlong into its archival holdings: newspapers, letters, diaries, manuscripts, photographs, maps, calendars, log books, contemporary books, magazines, journals etc. I was determined to read what the people of 1854 were reading. To read what they were writing for each other. This is what gives you the texture of the times. How you take the temperature of the times. The sense of how it smells and sounds. What people cried about. What they laughed about. This sort of research goes beyond 'data' and into the territory of 'being there'. (I once found some pressed flowers inside a packet of letters from the 1860s. I suspect that no-one had seen them for over 150 years, aside from the original recipient and maybe the librarian who created the accession file. The letter writer was a man notorious for being a complete hard-arse. Imagine my surprise to know he put pressed flowers in a letter to the young woman he was courting.)

And did the young lady who received the letters and pressed flowers say yes, ha ha ha?

She did!!

And with that Clare had to leave and feed her children.

I must say I feel extraordinarily privileged to have taken part in this discussion. My heartfelt thanks to Clare Wright for her candid insights (and to her children for going hungry for the cause!) Many thanks also to the indefatigable Nigel Featherstone, the HARDCOPY project officer, who organised the discussion. And finally thank you to my fellow HARCOPIERS for asking such interesting and helpful questions. Looking forward to seeing you all again when we reconvene in Canberra in September.

Earlier posts about the HARDCOPY program:

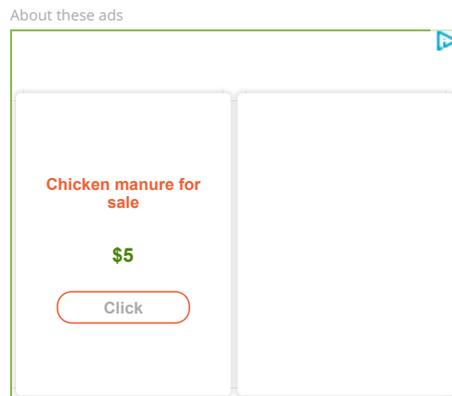
- [HARDCOPY Round 1 – Phew!](#)
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- [Update re HARDCOPY Writing Program](#)
- [A Win! Accepted into HARDCOPY Writing Program](#)

Some links relating to Clare Wright:

- [Clare Wright’s web site](#)
- [Interview on the ABC \(where Wright discusses the historical imagination\)](#)
- [Blogger Whispering Gums’ review of The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka](#)
- [Blogger The Resident Judge of Port Phillip’s review of The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka](#)
- [Blogger Stumbling Through the Past’s review of the The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka](#)
- [Blogger ANZLitlovers’ review of The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka](#)

**Acknowledgments**

The ACT Writers Centre is supported by the ACT Government. HARDCOPY has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.



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## 10 responses »



Lisa Hill on July 21, 2015 at 11:21 am said:

Thanks for the mention – and \*blush\* in such august company too!  
This Hardcopy initiative sounds wonderful!

Reply ↓



MST on July 21, 2015 at 11:38 am said:

The ANZLitlovers blog is always worth a mention – it's a treasure! And yes, it's definitely a privilege to be part of the HARDCOPY initiative.

Reply ↓



Gail Rehbein on July 21, 2015 at 11:27 am said:

Great write-up Michelle!

Reply ↓



MST on July 21, 2015 at 11:39 am said:

Thanks!

Reply ↓



ingridbaring on July 21, 2015 at 1:35 pm said:

A wonderful synopsis of the chat session, thanks Michelle. It will be good to file away in one of my boxes! And it was indeed a pleasure and a privilege to be part of such an amazing session. Thanks evveryone.

Reply ↓



MST on July 21, 2015 at 2:03 pm said:

Glad to be useful – thanks!

Reply ↓



whisperinggums on July 21, 2015 at 6:02 pm said:

Thanks for the link, Michelle. What a great interview. I started noting things I wanted to comment on but there's so much worth talking about. I did like her discussion of objectivity and critical distance, that they are perhaps a little different and that the latter is the critical one. Anyhow, all up, a great post. Thanks for sharing. Nigel is a wonderfully thoughtful and enthusiastic creator AND supporter of the arts isn't he.

Reply ↓



MST on July 21, 2015 at 7:23 pm said:

The online discussion format was a bit crazy but in a good way. We used Facebook, so the comments came one after the other while Clare madly typed away answering something four comments up. Clare's insights were so useful and interesting that it was definitely worth it. I found her response about research methods particularly enlightening.  
Yes, we are terribly lucky to have Nigel looking after us.

Reply ↓



whisperinggums on July 21, 2015 at 8:39 pm said:

I loved her discussion about note-taking. It reminded me of my university days when I'd take lots of notes, then as I worked out the structure of my essay, I'd go back and "code" my notes with letters representing keywords. These days though I'm sure I'd try to be more electronic!

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**Pingback:** [9 Questions: an interview with Eleanor Limprecht, author of Long Bay | Adventures in Biography](#)

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