

Paper presented at Symposium on *Transnational Ties: Australian Lives in the World*, organised by the National Centre of Biography and held at the Australian National University on 3 March 2009

Ann Curthoys

Thank you for inviting me here today. This event has given me the opportunity to consider again the promise and the constraints of transnational history. I first began writing on this issue in the early 2000s, influenced I think by developments internationally and by a sense that Australian history had to broaden its horizons both for its own health as a field of study and in order to attract the attention of historians outside the specialist field of Australian history. After writing quite separately several essays published in 2002 and 2003, Marilyn Lake and I organised a two-day event in 2004 here at the ANU. This was the Transnational History Symposium, and our aim was to explore the historiographical issues raised by the idea of transnationalism. We wanted to think about how scholars working on Australian historical material might respond to the growing interest in transnational approaches to history.¹ I don't think at that point we had a very clear idea about what transnational history might look like, what it included, and what it did not.

The conference achieved its aims. We quickly realised that transnational denoted something very specific, and that we cannot designate all forms of non-national thinking about the past *transnational*. We explored world history, regional histories, imperial history and comparative history, all allied forms of history that are also not contained within national boundaries, but which are analytically distinct from transnational history. We concluded that transnational was an analytical concept that helped us to recognise the presence and importance of nations in modern history, without taking the nation as our prime object of study. It was a concept about connections and networks across national borders. Like many other scholars in this field, we reached for metaphors of fluidity, speaking of circulation and flows (of people, discourses, and commodities), alongside metaphors of connection and relationship.

The book that came out of that symposium, *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (2006), was an early publication of ANU E Press. In the Introduction, Marilyn and I defined transnational history as "the study of the ways in which past lives and events have been shaped by processes and relationships that have transcended the borders of nation-states". "Transnational history", we wrote, "seeks to understand ideas, things, people, and practices which have crossed national boundaries". We also commented that transnational history is generally "in a complex relation with national history; it may seek to interrogate, situate, supersede, displace, or avoid it altogether". We listed a number of kinds of history that were particularly open to transnational approaches: histories of ideas, political movements, international organisations, migration, exploration and voyaging, and environments.

¹ "Cultural history and the nation", in *Cultural History in Australia*, Hsu-Ming Teo and Richard White (eds) 1st Edition, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2003, pp 22-37; "We've just started Making National Histories and You Want Us to Stop Already?" in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation*, Antoinette Burton (eds), Duke University Press, Durham, USA, 2003, pp.70-89; 'Does Australian History Have a Future?', *Australian Historical Studies*, No 118, 2002, pp.140 -52.

We especially listed biography, which had emerged during the symposium as a major site for transnational scholarship.

The book we are here to discuss today, *Transnational Ties*, demonstrates in considerable detail that biography **is** indeed ideally suited to transnational scholarship, and that transnational biography can lead us to ask new questions and illuminate some old ones. I want now to explore how this volume does this by looking at some of the essays. In the last part of my comments, I want to discuss how this book differs from *Connected Worlds* in its mobilisation of the idea of transnational.

So, to the essays. I have decided to discuss only a few, rather than say a few words about every chapter. This is meant as no disrespect to those I've not mentioned, and I trust that with a panel of four all of them will come up for discussion in some way or other.

The first chapter I discuss is Julie Evans's chapter called "Biography and global history: reflections on examining colonial governance through the life of Edward Eyre". Julie wrote an excellent book on Eyre, called *Edward Eyre: Race and Colonial Governance* (2005). This chapter uses the research work undertaken then but goes on to ponder some historiographical issues that arise from her study, especially the relationship between biography and global history. She works with the idea that looking at significant individuals can be a way to study the intersection of great social forces, and applies this to the study of settler societies like our own. Her aim is nothing less than to find ways to enmesh biography and global history, which appear at first sight to be at the opposite ends of the spectrum of historical study.

Julie isn't quite a transnational historian, in my view. Nor is she a conventional biographer, as she wishes to de-centre the figure of Eyre the individual "in order to bring the more commonplace violence of colonialism more fully to the fore" (p. 30). She prefers to describe her approach as comparative rather than transnational history, and asks, very importantly I think, whether "transnational history" is the correct description for the history of settler societies in the nineteenth century that are in only a formative state of nationhood. I've thought a lot about this issue, too, and would agree that strictly speaking, for the nineteenth century in Australia, we are really speaking of transcolonial and imperial history rather than transnational history per se. And, yet, in fact, I would not want to speak too strictly, for the British colonies in Australasia came to think of themselves as nations, the nation of New South Wales, the nation of Victoria, and so on, long before the Australian nation became a political entity. That is one of the features of my own research into the relationship between those processes, on the one hand, whereby each colony acquired responsible government in the 1850s (later in WA) and, on the other, the ongoing relationships between Indigenous peoples and settlers that were playing out so differently in each Australian colony. Colonial identities in the second half of the nineteenth century meant a great deal. Even so, people, goods, and ideas flowed freely between them and between each of them and Britain, and between them and other colonies and nations, including India, Cape Colony, New Zealand, and the United States. These connections are mainly imperial relationships, but also intercolonial, and often transnational as well. In any case, Julie Evans's chapter seems to me an important one for this book, highlighting some of the issues that historians face as they grapple with imperial, national, comparative, and transnational histories.

Cindy McCreery's study of Prince Alfred's visit to Australia in 1867-68 raises some intriguing issues. She points out that the visit of Prince Alfred, Duke of

Edinburgh, would provide the royal family generally with “a timely opportunity to demonstrate the royal family’s Britishness” (p. 61). Since the accession of the Hanoverians to the British throne in 1714, the royal family had had to deal with complaints that they were more German than British, and so any chance to demonstrate attachment to Britain was welcome. Scotland was an especially good site for this. First George IV, then Queen Victoria, fell in love with Scotland; Victoria purchasing Balmoral, and her children, including Alfred, spending a great deal of time there. Nevertheless, the royal family still warmly embraced its German connection, and the Duke, while in the Australian colonies, frequently drew attention to them. He wore Prussian military uniform at some official ceremonies, which McCreery comments on as “astonishing” (p. 61). She notes, a little puzzled I think, that no one in Australia seemed to see loyalty to Germany and Britain as incompatible. It was not the local German community, she points out, but the Irish, who were most disaffected by the royal visit, and who stayed away from official functions. McCreery is surprised by what she finds but, indeed, Germans in mid-nineteenth-century Australia were welcomed and seen as near cousins, much more welcome than almost any other non-British immigrant. There was, in fact, a spirited debate in the New South Wales legislature in 1880, I think, over whether it should grant Germans assisted passages as it did immigrants from Britain. Although the debate ended in the negative, there were many pro-German views expressed during the debate and it was a sign of close feelings that were to dissipate in the last part of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth as Britain and Germany’s interests increasingly clashed.

Many of the contributors don’t really take to the label transnational very warmly. Julie Evans preferred ‘comparative history’, and Cindy McCreery’s study is essentially one of imperial history. Nicholas Brown takes us in yet another direction – the growth in the post World War I period of the idea of the ‘international’. He traces the growing desire of many thoughtful people to leave aside national ties and embrace the idea of themselves as international citizens, citizens of the world. He suggests that empire becomes relatively less important as these new modes of attachment develop. His focus is Raymond Watt, an advocate of international causes from the 1920s to the 1940s, and a leading force in the NSW branch of the League of Nations Union. The Union campaigned on a range of issues, including disarmament, the arbitration of international conflict, the collective enforcement of peace, and setting standards for labour, health and migration. Nick’s study of the LNU resonates with some of my own work on earlier generations of historians who studied imperial constitutional history in a way that has since become unfashionable. One of the reasons for their enthusiasm for the study of how responsible government came to the white colonies is that they see the British Commonwealth as a force for international cooperation and understanding, a trial run as it were for international peacekeeping and spreading democracy. Few of us believe in the Commonwealth in this way any more, and it is something of a shock to realise how strongly these historians of the 1920s to the 1960s believed in it both as a force for good and as a subject for historical inquiry.

Mark Hearn emphasises the breadth of Alfred Deakin’s intellectual and political interests, his wide reading and the diverse sources of his ideas, the “transnational domain of the Western imagination” (p. 200). He emphasises also Deakin’s strong affinities with Britain, noting that Deakin read the Kipling children’s book, *Puck of Pook’s Hill*, peopled with ancient heroic figures that supposedly shaped British history. Although Deakin also loved Australian literature, and saw himself as

an independent Australian Briton, his imagination was truly eclectic, diverse, and transnational.

In the third part of this paper, I want to raise some questions for discussion.

My first point is to note the continuing importance of the national in this volume. The nation has not disappeared. What holds together the people narrated in this volume, the editors suggest, is that all were concerned to think about what Australia meant to them. For many it was home, but Australia came to matter even for those who were less clearly attached, like Jim Hammerton's English migrants, Nancy Paxton's Jean Devanny, originally from New Zealand, Maggie Mackellar's Western district settlers, Mark Hearn's cosmopolitan Alfred Deakin, and Cassandra Pybus's African American convict, Billy Blue. Perhaps it was less true for Edward Eyre, though his visit to the Australian colonies helped to shape his thinking and later life in Jamaica and England. It probably wasn't at all true for Prince Alfred, who may have returned home just pleased to be alive. Still, the idea of Australia does serve as an anchor for this study, proving yet again that the idea of the transnational is always in tension with the claims of the national. Jill Matthews wrote of the value of transnational approaches for prising our subjects "out of the death grip of the national" (p. xv). Perhaps the kind of national that survives here is less a death grip than a firm handshake but its presence is unmistakable.

My second point concerns the uncertain status of the central concept, "transnational". The editors, in their introduction, are very clear that they are using the term to emphasise the ways in which Australian lives are, in their words, "intricately enmeshed with the world, bound by ties of allegiance and affinity, intellect and imagination" (p. xiv). They want to emphasise, against old-fashioned searches for Australian identity or Australian character, stories of "diaspora, imperialism, exile and conflict" (p. xiv). They want to explore, not simply the movement of people from one place to another, but also the movement of the mind, that is, the transnationalism of the intellect and the imagination.

Yet, if the editors have a clear project, I'm not sure that they've managed to bring all their contributors along with them. As I've mentioned, a few are somewhat dubious as to whether transnational really applies to the kind of work they do. For others, transnational is less an analytic term, which is the way I would use it, than a description of something out there in the world, something to be experienced, judged, and described. People, places and states of mind are described as transnational. Maggie Mackellar writes of a transnational conception of home (p. 112). Prince Alfred has "transnational experience" (p. 67). Alfred Deakin has a transnational reading list. Henry Alexander Wickham, a planter who operated in many locations, about whom Ann Lane writes, conducts "transnational activities". For Nancy Paxton, Jean Devanny is a "transnational' subject" (p. 215). Susan Carson explores how Christina Stead and Eleanor Dark "conceptualised transnational experience in their fiction" (p. 229), and describes Stead as a "transnational novelist". I find these usages just a little odd, and I struggle to give meaning to notions of transnational subject and transnational novelist. I would rather think of subjects, novelists, economic activities, and personal experiences as something we might analyse in a transnational frame.

My third and (almost) last point concerns the question of critical edge. In many of these essays, transnationalism has become something "good", something to be desired, emulated, and celebrated. To my mind, transnational is a morally neutral term, simply denoting connectedness, and this might have dramatically varying

results. It might lead to broader sympathies, but it might also result in the strengthening of racial ideas and allegiances, as work by Julie Evans, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds demonstrates. The connections the people make across national borders might be of any moral character at all.

Finally, and related to my previous point, I wonder if the idea of transnational is in some of these essays, especially those on literary figures, doing the work that might be better done by the notion of cosmopolitan, or cosmopolitanism, an ideal of being in the world, of world citizenship, and being open to a range of diverse local influences and traditions. It seems to me some of these contributors might have used the “edit - replace” function on their computers to change cosmopolitan to transnational, to suit the symposium. Cosmopolitanism seems to me the more complex normative concept, whereas “transnational” denotes simply a particular method of analysis and interpretation. I’ll conclude by saying that the relationship between cosmopolitanism and transnational frames of analysis deserves further exploration.

Ann Curthoys